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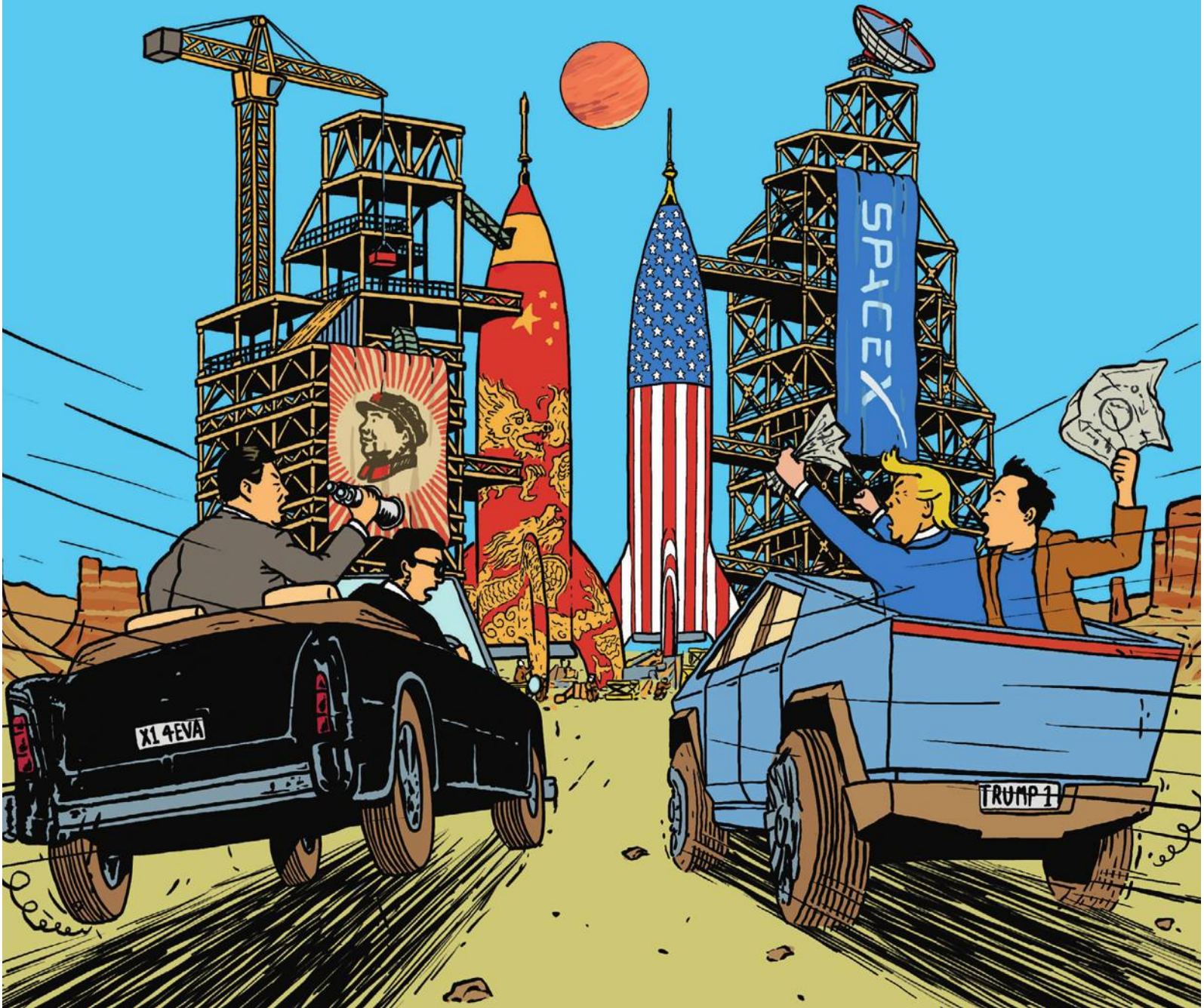
THE SPECTATOR WORLD

Mission to Mars

David Whitehouse on the challenge of the century



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Center stage

In popular mythology, America is the land that innovates while Europe regulates. America gets on with things while Europe prevaricates by allowing Luddites, environmentalists and all kinds of naysayers to call the tune.

There is some truth in that, which is why the growth in the US economy has outstripped that of Europe this century. It's also why America has a near monopoly in the tech sphere that now shapes our age.

Now, however, America, like Europe, finds itself consumed by a popular war against data centers. Given that these centers are the beating heart of the modern economy, just as the coal mines were the lifeblood of the industrial revolution, this presents a very big problem.

Unless it can be resolved, an eager China may very well seize the advantage and get ahead in a technological revolution that, until now, has been led by America.

Over the past few months, there has been an explosion of protests about data centers as well as legislative moves against them. As Robert Bryce reported in our last issue, the first seven months of this year saw 274 cases in which the construction of data centers across the US was either banned or subject to severe restrictions. Until this year, developers had few problems building them wherever they wanted. Now, we see increasing hostility from local residents and politicians.

New York State has passed a one-year moratorium against new construction. In Maine, legislators tried to block the building of large centers altogether, until their bill was thrown out by Governor Janet Mills. Even Loudoun County, Virginia – which is known as the world's data-center capital – is looking at new restrictions.

There are a number of reasons for the resistance. Data centers bring noise and urbanization without, crucially, creating much in the way of employment. But above all they are voracious consumers of power and water. While it might be tempting to think the current industrial revolution is much cleaner than the original one, with its boilers and smokestacks, the energy consumption of data centers is extraordinary, and is growing rapidly.

Every time AI bots are upgraded, their need for power leaps to a new level. According to McKinsey, 5 percent of last year's US electricity consumption came from data centers. Google is said to use as much energy as a city of 250,000 people.

Moreover, the rush of data centers comes just as Americans are seeing their fuel bills rise. Data centers are not the only cause, of course – there is also the small matter of the Iran war and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, through which around 20 percent of the world's crude oil supplies used to pass.

If America is to continue to be the world leader in AI, it is vital people learn to live with data centers

At the same time, it should not come as a surprise that people make a connection between their soaring bills and the construction work down the road: the installation of data centers is competing with domestic demand and pushes up prices for everyone.

Vice President J.D. Vance has addressed the issue. If developers want to build data centers, he says, they are going to have to address the issue of local power supplies. The federal government, he claims, will make it easier for them to combine construction of data centers with the construction of power plants.

Some have suggested that the centers provide a prime opportunity for renewables. Wind and solar plants might suit the image of a fast-growing 21st century, but sadly those who are in the business of operating data centers are generally less keen. They need access to reliable power 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Without a leap in battery technology to allow large quantities of energy to be stored at far lower costs, local gas plants are more realistic. But that does leave the issue of water consumption which, in some locations, may prove a bigger problem.

The obvious places to put data centers are in the desert, where they will annoy the fewest people. But desert areas have an acute shortage of water and present the biggest risk of the machines overheating.

It may turn out that these are transitory issues. Over time, it is quite possible that the trend in energy consumption by AI models will be reversed. It is perhaps a good thing that there is some pressure on Big Tech over energy consumption now, because it will incentivize developers to look for ways of improving the efficiency of their technology as well as its performance. This is one aspect in which China may be outpacing America, with DeepSeek claiming that its large language model can operate at one tenth of the energy consumption of its US competition. And if AI starts to consume less power, then water, used for cooling, will become less of an issue.

Even so, if America is to continue to be the world leader in AI, it is vital Americans learn to live with data centers. Democracies do not have the advantage that Chinese industry has in being able to foist its plants on the population, regardless of the level of civic opposition.

To win public affection, the data-center industry is going to have to accept that it can't simply plug its plants into the existing grid; it is, as the Trump administration insists, going to have to become a significant supplier of power, too. That will not guarantee the US eternal success in the tech sector. But it would move an important obstacle out of the way.

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Trump's troubadour

The stage lights flicker. The MAGA faithful whoop at the first tinkle of piano keys. They've been here a hundred times. They know what's coming.

> If tomorrow all the things were gone
> I'd worked for all my life
> And I had to start again
> With just my children and my wife

"God Bless the USA" has been through several iterations since it first appeared on Lee Greenwood's third album, *You've Got a Good Love Comin'*.

It was a Gold-certified single in May 1984 and the soundtrack for a short film about Ronald Reagan, which was shown at that summer's Republican National Convention. Greenwood performed the song at the 1988 RNC – and it resurged in popularity after the First Gulf War and the 9/11 attacks. Until the 2010s, it served as a paean of right-tinged American unity. But over the past decade or so, it has taken on a new meaning: Donald Trump is about to take the stage.

"I did 16 United Service Organizations tours all around the world. 'God Bless the USA' became a military anthem long before it became a national anthem," says a softly spoken Greenwood. "It was popular among those people who were citizens of America by indoctrination, that would come to America to become citizens. At baseball games and football games, it became a song of spirit, rather than what it is today. As I look back at the past ten or 15 years, and now with the 25th anniversary of 9/11, it's really become a part of American fiber."

Henry VIII had the Venetian organist Dionysius Memo. The Sun King Louis XIV had Jean-Baptiste Lully. Trump's chief court musician is Lee Greenwood, an 83-year-old country singer from California. "I performed all over the world with him," Greenwood says. "I've been allowed the pleasure and the prominence of introducing the President more than 12 times."

He adds: "When I wrote the phrase, 'I'm proud to be an American,' I hadn't heard a lot of people say they were proud to be just American… Whether you're an Italian American, a British American, an Australian American, the only people that really have the right to put something in front of 'American' would be an African American, who were brought here to this continent, and Indian Americans, who were here long before the white man. Otherwise, everyone else should be an American first. That's what I wrote that line for."

Greenwood and Trump first met decades ago through a mutual interest. "My wife and I have been married 34 years. She was Miss Tennessee USA when we met in 1989," Greenwood says. "For a number of years, she worked for Trump while he owned Miss Universe. Our acquaintance would have been during those years. We weren't necessarily friends yet, but we certainly were acquaintances. The many times that we would go to pageants together, we'd be sitting near him and have a conversation when he was just a normal American citizen."

'I'm not really embedded in Washington. But I serve at the pleasure of the President'

Greenwood met Kimberly (his fourth and current wife) on a USO tour, when he took three pageant queens with him to see the troops almost 40 years ago. "We became very close during that tour," he says. "Then she finished college, and then we started dating and were married in 1992."

Greenwood has sung for Trump at the most memorable moments of the President's political life: for America's 250th birthday after the thunderstorms; in the heat of the National Mall military parade; at the Madison Square Garden rally; at the Republican National Convention in Milwaukee, five days after the assassination attempt in Butler, Pennsylvania.

"In Milwaukee, we introduced him to the audience. It was electric," the singer recalls. "He walked in with a bandage on his ear. I waited until he got in position and then I actually spoke from my heart. There was nothing scripted there. It got interesting acclaim from media because they thought that I was scripted as an announcer, but I was not. It was more, 'I'm talking about my friend here, I'm glad that he's alive and we hope that he can run the nation again.'"

"It's an interesting way that I serve the nation and serve the President without being a government employee," Greenwood says. "I'm kind of an outsider there. I'm not really embedded in Washington. But I serve at the pleasure of the President. And these events that I've done for President Trump have drawn a great amount of interest in my career."

Now in his early eighties, Greenwood is keeping busy. Ever the patriot, he has just relaunched his line of Soldier Valley liquors. He still plays shows across the country. How much does performing for Trump impact his schedule? "It doesn't really affect anything," he says. "It really has lifted me up much higher than probably I would be as just a country artist. Sometimes I'm contacted by the White House to let me know where I'm needed and depending on my schedule… I can't go every time, but I would say 90 percent of the time that I have a schedule that's clear enough that I could go sing for him in a venue that he prefers."

"I probably have most audiences from the right and not from the left," Greenwood concedes, "only because I think they're a little bit more adamant about anyone that aligns himself with President Trump. But I do have a lot of Democrat friends where that's not an issue... because they recognize that I am an artist first and a musician and a singer who actually is pretty good at what I do."

In the next few weeks, Greenwood is due to perform ahead of President Trump's appearance at the RNC's "midterm convention" in Texas and at the NASCAR Bass Pro Shops Night Race in Bristol, Tennessee. "I will be with the President in Dallas," he says, "And probably the next night, which would be 9/11, probably in New York. I understand there's going to be more than one president in attendance for that event."

And next year, for the first time since 2003, Greenwood will release new songs – on the Gaither Music label. "I'm actually doing a new gospel album," he says. "We already got the tracks done. I'll do the vocals before the end of the year. It'll be out in the spring. I don't do much writing anymore... I have a 28-year-old son who is a music producer and engineer, and he has co-written the songs with me."

Hopefully Greenwood is able to complete his recording schedule alongside his singing duties for the President. After that, at least he'll know he's free.

DIARY

Helen Andrews

I sometimes feel like I have lost ten IQ points per child. If my husband and I ever have a fourth, I might have to quit writing altogether and find a less cognitively demanding line of work – maybe run for political office. The causes of "mommy brain" are disputed. Studies have shown that, after she gives birth, certain parts of a woman's brain become more active while others shrink. Once this was thought to be a result of temporary hormone changes, but now scientists believe that pregnancy causes a woman's brain to be permanently restructured. Even years after their children's births, mothers' brains still show a reduction in gray matter volume. A scan of my brain would doubtless look like an aerial map of North Korea and South Korea, with a black expanse in the region responsible for retaining new information but a lively skyline in the region that invents creative answers to unexpected questions. The five-year-old, our eldest, is a fount of these.

The five-year-old and I recently had a long conversation about invasive species after he saw me kill a spotted lanternfly. The rule in our house is that we don't squish bugs or spiders for no reason, so I explained that these bugs didn't belong here, they came over by accident on a ship from Asia and they were throwing the local ecosystem out of balance. You know how Daddy is from Australia? I continued. Well, Australia had a problem with invasive rabbits from England that were eating all the plants and leaving nothing for the wombats and the wallabies, so the government released a virus that killed all the rabbits. Having summoned the image of a rabbit hecatomb, I hastily explained that little boys and girls who had pet rabbits could take them to the vet for a vaccine to protect them from the virus. Here the five-year-old jumped in. What would happen if a group of wild rabbits went to a vet and pretended to be someone's pets in order to get the vaccine? I told him that would make a good plot for a movie. He was off and running like a Hollywood VP of development. The wild rabbits would need to have a domesticated rabbit friend to explain the whole vaccine situation to them. The movie can't end with them just returning to the Outback, because they are still an invasive species,

so we'd need to get them on to a ship back to England. Maybe a native mammal could show them the devastation caused by out-of-control rabbit overpopulation and they would decide to go home on their own.

Australia is unique among the nations of the world in its willingness to use extreme measures to control pest animals. One of the government zoologists responsible for Australia's rabbit control program wrote that his European counterparts were constantly telling him that the public in their countries would never approve plans like the ones he managed every day. Polls confirm this. Compared to Europeans, Australians are less susceptible to sentimental animal rights appeals about poor little bunnies. The zoologist attributed this to the Australian character, shaped by an unforgiving continent far from civilization where survival required a pragmatic approach to life. Australians are also keenly aware that they are the world champions of biodiversity and their country the only place on Earth for bilbies, wombats and kangaroos. Listening to my five-year-old discuss myxomatosis and calicivirus, I thought: the Australian character must be genetic.

The culture clash of raising an Australian child has been greater than I thought it would be – and I don't just mean that all three of our children have inherited a love of Vegemite. One thing you have to know about Australians is they love pranks. Something about the larrikin spirit. When our eldest was only four, I explained to him the concept of April Fool's Day and after that, for months, he asked on an almost daily basis if it was "prank day" yet. He brainstormed a dozen different ideas and together we refined them into high-quality gags. The one we eventually chose started with a basic food swap. He had the idea of putting whipped cream instead of sour cream on Daddy's taco. This grew more elaborate as the weeks progressed until we had an entirely fake decoy taco: strawberry chunks instead of tomato, shredded coconut instead of cheese, mint instead of cilantro and chocolate-covered marshmallows instead of chicken in a *mole poblano* sauce.

I wanted our son's first April Fool's prank to go well, so I did all the food preparation out of Dad's sight. Our son assembled the regular tacos and the gag one so they would look indistinguishable. Some anticipatory giggles from the little prankster probably clued Papa in to the idea that something was up, but overall he reacted with a satisfying look of surprise. Our son was delighted. I thought, if I have enough brain cells to help him pull that off, that's enough.

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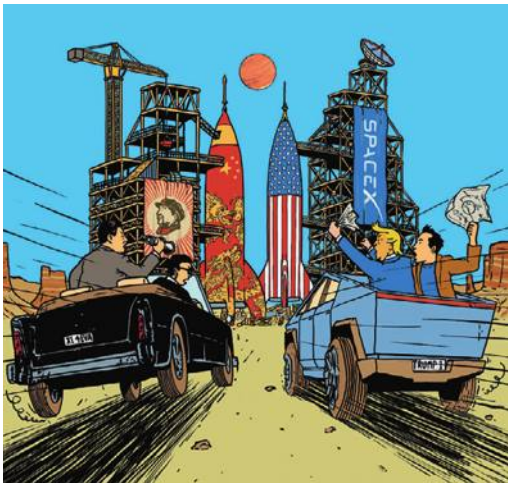
Man on Mars

The mission to the red planet will define the 21st century

DAVID WHITEHOUSE



America has what might be the best evidence for life on Mars. NASA's Perseverance rover has gathered rock samples that could contain compelling biosignatures of ancient microbial life. No one is quite sure yet, and the samples need to be tested in a lab before we can conclusively prove that our distant neighbor once harbored life. Too bad. We're never going to see the results. In January, funding for the project was canceled. Donald Trump has other plans for the red planet.

He obsesses over competition with China and with planting the Stars and Stripes on alien soil. So to the horror of many of the world's scientists, Trump has pulled the US space effort away from incremental robotic exploration to prioritize human landings on the Moon and Mars.

"Americans are explorers, builders, innovators, entrepreneurs and pioneers," Trump said during his inaugural address last year. He pledged that the US would "pursue our manifest destiny into the stars." His understanding of space comes mainly from Elon Musk, seen by many as wildly optimistic. Musk aims to launch unmanned Mars-bound spacecraft later this year, timed to the next Earth-Mars orbital alignment, with crewed missions to follow in 2028 if the uncrewed mission succeeds.

Although Musk continues to promote this ambitious timetable, most expect it to slip, including Jared Isaacman, NASA's chief. He estimates that we won't have people on Mars for at least ten to 15 years and even that is seen as optimistic.

Many scientists have criticized the cancellation of the samples' return. Victoria Hamilton, of the Southwest Research Institute, said canceling it will overturn decades of research and diminish US space leadership on the global stage. She's not the only one. Casey Dreier, head of space policy at the US Planetary Society, said that it was an "extinction-level event" for space science.

Congress partly sided with the scientists. They rejected most of Trump's proposed cuts, allocating NASA $24.4 billion, which was much more than expected. But Trump still wants to slash non-exploration programs such as Earth science, climate monitoring and robotic missions, and allocate the savings to human exploration.

Undaunted by congressional opposition, his 2027 budget includes $1 billion for Mars-focused investment. The new money will be spent on building nuclear-powered spacecraft that will thrust astronauts toward Mars faster than conventional rockets and researching surface nuclear reactors to power a base.

Wider NASA funding is also being reoriented. The Space Launch System rocket and Orion crew capsule – the two main pieces of government-built hardware at the heart of NASA's return mission to the Moon – are to be phased out. These will be replaced with privately developed rockets and spacecraft. Trump's hope is that, by cutting back on proprietary technology for the Moon mission, NASA's focus can instead turn to sending astronauts to Mars.

Despite scientific skepticism, putting astronauts on Mars remains one of Trump's more popular initiatives

John Grunsfeld, the former head of science at NASA, thinks this outcome is the worst of both worlds. He says the US will end up with less science and a budget nowhere near large enough for Trump's plans. Trading robotic science for a manned mission doesn't make sense, he says.

Yet this is how the White House justifies canceling the Mars Sample Return project: the money is better spent elsewhere. And anyway, testing whether life once existed could be achieved by future humans on Mars. Despite scientific skepticism, putting astronauts on Mars remains one of Trump's more popular initiatives – a 2023 poll found 57 percent of Americans are in favor. Trump's drive is the greatest gamble since Queen Isabella of Castile symbolically offered to sell her crown jewels to fund Christopher Columbus. If the President fails, the US could lose a lot. China has plans to launch Tianwen-3 in 2028 to bring back its own Martian samples. They have a shortlist of 19 potential landing sites with the top three to be selected by the end of the year. Beijing is already building a high-security sample laboratory with stringent biosafety containment for analysis of Martian material.

So, while the Perseverance samples languish, China could win this important race. Should that happen, expect China to use it for all it's worth. The message will be clear: Beijing achieved what Washington could not.

Meanwhile, the race to put people back on the Moon is too tight to call. Isaacman says victory will be measured in months, not years. The US project started in 2004 and since then there has been only one human mission, the spectacular Artemis II. That was until China threatened to get to the Moon first and the US increased its pace.

Since his return to office, Trump has issued multiple executive orders aimed at countering the Chinese threat and ensuring American space superiority. He has ordered NASA to return astronauts to the Moon by 2028 and to establish the first elements of a permanent lunar outpost by 2030 to "prepare for the journey to Mars." Every part of the US space program is being redirected at the red planet.

There are other projects that are being abandoned to meet that one goal. The US-led International Space Station is also soon to be retired, and Trump wants a series of smaller, commercially built stations in its place. Once that happens, China will have the largest low-Earth orbit station, Tiangong.

Should China win those three races – the return to the Moon, the largest space station and proving life existed on Mars – it could reshape the international order back here on Earth. Much of the world will conclude that China holds the keys to the rest of the cen-

tury. That is why Trump has gambled it all on a manned mission to Mars.

No planet has embedded itself so deeply in our culture. It must have started on some African night when our ancestors, not yet human but with a spark of comprehension, pondered its strange yet familiar color. Since then, it has reminded people of a drop of blood in the sky. For the ancients, Mars represented war and ruin, pain and death. The same is true today. Mars will test humanity far more severely than the Moon. Musk's dreams of a vast migration, millions of people starting again on a new world, will collide with the harsh reality of off-Earth living. That aim is still little more than a fantasy. Mars will be hard won, as the graves on the red planet will one day testify.

For new Martians, the Sun will be an unnerving sight, smaller and with no warmth as far as it's possible to tell from inside a spacesuit or habitat. Stepping outside, there is nothing in the way of comfort. No movement except for the little caused by the wind and the rare landslide. No sound save for their own breathing in their pressure suits. And every breath must be measured, every calorie counted, every scrap of energy generated and accounted for, every crew member and relationship tolerated, every second of life meticulously planned. In all of human experience, there has never been an isolation as total as that of Mars.

In 2012, the Austrian skydiver Felix Baumgartner jumped from the stratosphere, launching himself from a capsule suspended from a helium balloon. He was at an altitude of 39 km in the very upper reaches of the atmosphere, which is cold, thin and deadly. If his suit had developed a tear, he would have lost consciousness within 15 seconds. The ambient pressure is so low that, within a few minutes, his blood would have begun to boil. Yet as Baumgartner contemplated the moment, the atmosphere around him was warmer and thicker than that found on the surface of Mars.

Jeff Bezos, the founder and funder of the Blue Origin aeronautics company, once said: "My friends who want to move to Mars? I say, 'Do me a favor, go live on the top of Mount Everest for a year first, and see if you like it – because it's a garden paradise compared to Mars.'"

The challenge of Mars will define the 21st century, alongside AI, the control of the genetic structure of our bodies, the quantum revolution, nuclear fusion and our environment. Of all these, the US and China know that it is Mars that will establish the order of things for the centuries to come.

At this moment there is briny water flowing on Mars; ice forming at the Martian poles; the morning mist is clearing from the Valley of the Mariners; a dust storm stirs in the northern plains. And the first person to visit Mars is currently living somewhere in China or America.

Red flag

Could China colonize Mars before America?

IAN WILLIAMS

A 20-year-old Chinese researcher dressed in a red crayfish costume has become a symbol of Beijing's ambition. At a scientific conference in Paris last fall, he explained that he was working on an important project. His plans would enable his country's astronauts to prepare spicy crayfish soup, a Chinese favorite, on Mars.

"That's what we're competing with. The vibe is good in Beijing," Drew Endy, associate professor of bioengineering at Stanford University, said in evidence to a Senate hearing last month. The hearing examined whether the US is losing its innovation advantage to China. Concerned senators saw the big red crayfish as further evidence of the scale of Chinese ambition when it comes to Mars.

It has been more than five years since Tianwen-1, China's first Mars mission, touched down and deployed a rover called Zhurong, named after a mythical Chinese god of fire. The rover trundled off to explore the landscape of Utopia Planitia, a vast Martian plain, armed with a high-resolution camera and instruments for studying the climate and geology, as American rovers had done before it.

It operated for a year before a planned shutdown for the Martian winter but it never came out of hibernation. Scientists speculate that excessive dust blocked its solar panels. But the rover still operated for longer than planned and the mission confirmed Beijing's position as a major player in planetary exploration. China is the only nation apart from the US to successfully land on Mars.

If, as David Whitehouse writes, China does beat the US to get its hands on Martian rocks, it will be a Sputnik moment. It will also be the first step in a series of crewed Chinese missions to Mars.

Beijing is planning to begin these missions in as early as 2033, with a view to establishing a permanent base on the planet. China would then become the world's preeminent space power.

Certainly if they're the first to build a base, the Chinese would be able to exploit Mars's resources, such as yttrium and neodymium, unencumbered by American competition. This is China's explicit aim.

The country sends more rockets into space per year than any other nation. It operates the Tiangong space station, soon to be the largest when the International Space Station is retired in 2030. China has landed on the Moon's dark side and is building a Starlink-type mega-constellation of satellites at a rapid rate.

Its space budget is estimated at around $20 billion, still a distant second to America's, which is just shy of $80 billion. However, that Chinese budget is expanding rapidly in spite of a slowing economy – and the precise figure is uncertain because much of the program is opaque and linked to the Chinese military.

The People's Liberation Army sees space as crucial to 'first strike' operations in any future war

However, Beijing has not hidden its ambition to become the leading military power in space, testing anti-satellite weapons and recently a mysterious reusable robotic spacecraft dubbed the "divine dragon." Its activities, including deploying secret payloads in orbit around Earth, are drawing the attention of US strategists. The People's Liberation Army sees space as crucial to "first strike" operations during any potential future war.

Beijing deploys the rhetoric of furthering knowledge for mankind – especially in discussing the scientific payoffs of exploring Mars. In reality, the aim of its space program – and the Mars missions in particular – are brutally strategic, serving Beijing's wider geopolitical ambitions. It is accordingly being given high priority.

When China launched its first satellite in 1970, it broadcast the song "The East is Red" for 20 days before its batteries ran out. Today's propaganda is not quite as crude, but it still defines Beijing's space program. Get ready for spicy crayfish soup in space.

Flock and awe

The case for drone policing

HEATHER MAC DONALD

IGOR GNEDO

In the Russia-Ukraine war, drones have leveled the playing field between economically unmatched adversaries and have provided unprecedented capacity to monitor enemy troop and equipment movements. In domestic law enforcement, they are already being used for crime scene reconnaissance, for tracking suspects and for finding missing persons.

Their greatest potential, however, lies in detecting and responding to a crime in progress before a victim or witness reports it. This is a line that police agencies have been reluctant to cross.

A quadcopter drone is a battery-powered, unmanned aircraft, held aloft by four helicopter-like propellers. They usually carry cameras capable of recording in detail objects below them or as much as 2,000 feet away. At the start of the drones-for-policing era, an officer would carry one of the devices in his squad car and launch and pilot it himself at the site where it was needed – where a missing person was last seen, say, or at a public event at risk of a terror attack. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) regulations required drone operators to keep drones in their line of sight to avoid collisions with other aircraft. The drone and its pilot had to be near each other.

The big breakthrough came in 2018, when the Chula Vista, California, police department created the flagship Drone as First Responder (DFR) program. The idea behind DFR is that rather than arriving at an accident, missing person or hostage situation in tandem with its piloting officer, the drone would get there first to provide reconnaissance before officers arrive.

Getting first to a scene required launching drones from a central docking station rather than from an on-scene police car. A pilot in a central command center would guide the drone from afar. But such remote piloting meant that the drone was often beyond the pilot's visual line of sight, in violation of FAA rules. Obtaining a waiver from those rules was time-consuming and laborious.

The second breakthrough occurred in spring last year, when the FAA, spurred on by an executive order from Donald Trump, expedited the waiver process for law-enforcement remote piloting. The applications for waivers from line-of-sight requirements skyrocketed.

A reliable count of the police departments operating DFR programs is unavailable, but estimates put the number at 300

A drone can park itself on a table to preserve battery life and continue beaming a live video feed

to 400. Further estimates on the number of police departments using any kind of drone vary wildly from about 1,500 to 6,000. But the momentum is with DFR programs.

Drones have found missing dementia patients in minutes after conventional search-and-rescue teams fruitlessly searched for hours. They have located and tracked car thieves as they made their getaways, avoiding dangerous police pursuits (undoubtedly to the disappointment of many cops, who love to chase cars). They have unearthed criminals hiding in the woods late at night.

In April 2024, after a 911 caller reported a fight in progress in Silver Spring, Maryland, a drone recorded 45-year-old Jovan Ali stabbing his opponent and fleeing the scene. The drone led Montgomery County police officers to Ali's hiding place, where they arrested him without incident. The stabbing victim refused to testify, but prosecutors obtained a conviction anyway based on the drone footage.

In April last year, police in Dunwoody, Georgia, received an alert from a neighboring department saying that an active shooter had driven into their city. Dunwoody's license plate cameras found the suspect's car, then a drone traced the car to the roof of a car park and confirmed the suspect's identity from the tattoo on his neck. Armed with this intelligence, officers were able to effect a safe arrest.

First-responder drones provide officers

'It's unlikely to affect the current drought.'

with what is known as situational awareness, illustrating the layout of a potentially lethal environment before officers arrive. They can even do so indoors. If a suspect has barricaded himself in a house, possibly after taking hostages, officers can breach a door or window and send a drone in first. Some drones can break the windows themselves. Once inside, they can push open doors if they are not tightly shut and fly under tables. A drone can park itself on a table to protect its battery life and continue beaming a live video feed. The very act of sending in a drone can flush a suspect out. "They sound like loud vacuum cleaners and are psychologically intimidating," says Sergeant Justin Aita of the Talbot County Sheriff's Office in Maryland.

Sometimes, what drones do not find is as important as what they do. Last year, Los Angeles Police Department DFR drones responded to more than 3,000 emergency calls. In 11 percent of the dispatches, the drone discovered that the 911 report was incorrect or that the situation, such as a stalled car on a highway, had already been resolved, according to the *California Post*. In those cases, LAPD officers could abort their missions and turn their attention to more pressing matters.

Drones have prevented officer shootings by discrediting false reports that a suspect was wielding a firearm when in fact the object in question was a BB gun or cigarette lighter.

Until recently, Chinese DJI drones dominated the law-enforcement market because of their low cost and superior performance. (A policing-caliber drone, minus a docking station and other add-ons, runs from about $4,500 to $11,000.) At the end of last year, however, the Federal Communications Commission blocked new sales of DJI drones, citing national security concerns. The manufacturer, SZ DJI Technology, filed a suit in the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, claiming that the ban would cost the company more than $1.5 billion in its first year alone.

That suit is still pending. But the ban provided an opening for American companies, previously the underdogs of the drone world, which are now racing to capture market share.

Goals include extending battery life (now around 20 to 50 minutes, depending on wind and other weather conditions), increasing speeds (they can currently travel, on average, at about 32 mph) and developing new capacities for autonomous operations and perceptual reach.

US companies tout the synergies with their other law enforcement product lines – Flock Safety's license plate readers automatically feed data into Flock drones if the drones used by police have not already been equipped with their own license plate technology. BRINC drones are integrated with the software of partner Motorola Solutions, which provides police department operating systems.

As a scientific matter, American law-enforcement drone companies are squarely within the world of Silicon Valley. Their unapologetically pro-police stance, however, puts them at odds with that world – and sometimes even with police commanders themselves.

Flock Safety is the most embattled of the American manufacturers, less for its drones than for allegedly sharing its license plate reader feeds with US Immigration and Customs Enforcement and for several dozen cases in which individual officers used license plate readers for their own ends. Its CEO, Garrett Langley, is more than willing to fight back. In December last year, he wrote an email to the police department in Staunton, Virginia, in response to misinformation about the company's data security. "Flock, and the law enforcement agencies we partner

Their most significant potential use is being squelched by overwrought concerns about civil liberties

with, are under coordinated attack... We've been dealing with this since our founding, from the same activist groups who want to defund the police, weaken public safety, and normalize lawlessness."

Such language would give many Google employees a fit of the vapours. And it spooked the Staunton authorities as well. The Staunton police chief responded primly, saying his police department was not "under attack" but was simply experiencing "democracy in action." And the city proceeded with plans to cancel its license plate reader contract with Flock.

Despite such skirmishes, the law enforcement world is wildly enthusiastic about drones, seeing them as a vital "force multiplier" at a time of inadequate manpower. William Bratton, former head of the New York and Los Angeles police departments, says "drones will change American policing. Their potential use is unlimited."

Their most significant potential use, however, is being squelched by overwrought concerns about civil liberties. At present,

most police departments restrict what drone cameras are allowed to see on the way to, and coming back from, first-responder jobs.

Surprisingly, the liberal California enclave of Santa Monica has less restrictive rules. On July 6, 2024, the city's police department drone was returning to its station after answering a 911 call at the beach. The pilot spotted a man punching through the lock of an SUV with a screwdriver and ducking inside; the suspected thief proceeded to break into nearby cars as well. The drone pilot directed officers to the precise location and the burglar was arrested.

Had a similar situation arisen in, say, West Hollywood or Montgomery County, Maryland, the burglar would likely have continued his crime spree unmolested. West Hollywood requires that drone cameras be turned off while they are flying to and from a job; Montgomery County says cameras must be pointed toward the horizon when drones are in transit.

Police departments are terrified of being accused of "mass surveillance," especially with the American Civil Liberties Union and the Electronic Freedom Foundation (another left-wing civil libertarian group) nipping at their heels. Their public-relations materials stress the limited nature of their drone use: there will be no viewing the ground until the drone arrives at the scene, unless it is an

Police departments are terrified of being accused of 'mass surveillance'

emergency or the department has obtained a warrant from a judge. The opposition to greater use is bipartisan: many red states, such as Texas, Florida and North Carolina, codify those limitations in statutes.

In July, however, Ohio broke away from the pack. Despite fierce opposition from the Ohio chapter of the ACLU, the state passed a law allowing drones to observe what is "otherwise visible to the naked eye" without a warrant. This position conforms to the long-standing "plain view doctrine" in Fourth Amendment search-and-seizure law, which holds that people have no reasonable expectation of privacy for activities or objects exposed to public view, including from above. If an occupant of a commercial or private aircraft could see something on the ground, the police are allowed to as well, without a warrant.

Fourth Amendment law is notoriously byzantine, however, and a separate line of cases outlaws tracking a person's public movements, such as via cell phone data or aerial surveillance, if that tracking occurs over an extended period of time.

In 2020, the Baltimore Police Department ran a trial program using air surveillance to apprehend violent felons. Piloted aircraft, operating only during the day, captured pixelated images of cars and people; after a crime, data analysts could identify the pixelated dots representing the suspect during and after the crime and reverse the anonymization of the dots in order to track him down.

Brushing off the fact that the case had become moot, a majority of the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals, sitting en banc, ruled in 2021 that the discontinued program constituted an illegal warrantless search. Violent crime in black neighborhoods is the product of racism, Chief Judge Roger Gregory wrote in a concurrence, as was the alleged oversurveilling of black neighborhoods. The case, *Leaders of a Beautiful Struggle vs Baltimore Police Department*, has undoubtedly contributed to the opposition to proactive drone flights among skittish police departments.

In an ideal world, however, drones should be allowed at the very least to observe the ground going to and from first-responder calls. Banning such plain-view recording needlessly forgoes an anti-crime windfall when police departments remain in their post-George Floyd staffing crisis.

Drones should, moreover, be allowed to search for crime as it is happening without a 911 call. If a particular neighborhood is being crushed by nighttime robberies or car break-ins, a drone could be sent on patrol. A drone could follow the public movements of members of criminal organizations, instead of using an organized crime squad to tail the suspects. Drones could watch critical infrastructure and parks. They could form virtual barriers around beleaguered synagogues. They would be automatically connected to other anti-crime technologies such as street cameras, facial recognition systems and license plate readers, so that if a land-based machine spots a warrant absconder's car, a drone would be automatically dispatched to track him until a cop could show up.

The ever-unbuttoned Flock team articulated the classic response to civil libertarian objections last December: "If you're not involved in a crime, you shouldn't be concerned" about a public intrusion on your privacy, a representative for the company told San Francisco's ABC News outlet. Spotting an opening to diss a competitor, the CEO of dronemaker Skydio mocked this statement in a blog post as an unforced public-relations error. The standard retort to the "if you're doing nothing wrong, you have nothing to fear" argument is the "slippery slope": give the police this power and they will expand it until we live in a totalitarian state. This concern is valid; finding an acceptable balance between security and liberty (or, really, privacy) is an ongoing challenge. But another aspect of freedom that libertarians ignore is the freedom to use public spaces and enjoy private domains without predation or fear. The proper response to the slippery slope argument is to demand transparency regarding police activity, not to forgo technological advances that would have such large public-safety benefits.

The conflict over drones is part of a broader war on high-tech policing. Like so much today, that war is often prosecuted on racial grounds. In 2024, Chicago Mayor

Finding an acceptable balance between security and liberty is an ongoing challenge

Brandon Johnson canceled a contract with ShotSpotter, which provides automated gunshot detection, in part because the technology showed that most shootings in the city occurred in majority black and Hispanic neighborhoods.

Jay Stanley, a senior policy analyst with the ACLU, claims that a newly announced federal grant program to assist cities buy drones, AI systems, license plate readers and other high-tech would be trained on "communities of color... blanketing communities with surveillance and generally seeking to turn state and local police agencies into instruments of Trump's federal government – its ideological obsessions, racism and approach of loyalty over law."

The President's anti-crime initiatives "target low income Black and Brown communities," according to the ACLU. Actually they target crime, which is magnitudes higher in black neighborhoods than elsewhere. (Stanley did not respond to a request for an interview; the Electronic Freedom Foundation declined to speak to me.)

Meanwhile, the innovation continues. Drone speeds are reaching 60 miles per hour, though that demands a comparable increase in long-distance visual acuity. A single pilot can now operate four drones at a time, extending the perceptual capacities of a single officer. Some drones instantly generate 3-D maps of interior and exterior spaces.

As policing gets smarter, criminals remain breathtakingly stupid – carrying a gun concealed in one's crotch to a court date, for example, or having to ask one's just-hijacked Lyft driver for instructions on driving his car (two recent examples from Chicago). For now, dumb continues to best smart, but that balance may change.

DANIEL McCARTHY

Class clowns

What would Karl Marx think of his latter-day disciples in the Democratic Socialists of America? No doubt he would find their politics largely agreeable, but they would present him with a class conundrum. DSA is not a movement of workers but of people with intellectual credentials: some 80 percent of its members have college degrees and 35 percent have advanced degrees.

Those credentials are all granted by the institutions that capitalists sustain – it's not bricklayers who endow Harvard University. State colleges and universities depend on government funding, but government itself, under capitalism, is simply an instrument of business interests. As the *Communist Manifesto* says, "the bourgeoisie… since the establishment of Modern Industry and of the world market, conquered for itself, in the modern representative State, exclusive political sway."

Conservatives as well as Marxists have reason to wonder about this: why does capitalism so lavishly subsidize these self-described socialists?

Marx, after all, thought capitalism was fundamentally oppressive and unjust, expropriating from workers the value of their labor. Yet if that's what's happening, the ownership class is funneling hundreds of billions of dollars worth of stolen profits into allowing students to live for years – even a decade or more, for some with advanced degrees – without selling their own labor on the market.

What's more, Marx was quite a severe utilitarian. The "labor theory of value" does not mean that the more "work" that goes into a commodity, the more valuable it is. Goods must have some utility, for consumption or exchange, to count as products of socially useful labor. There is such a thing as socially useless activity – Marx scruples to dignify it with the label "labor" – that leads to products nobody wants to buy.

America's private institutions of higher education are centers of capital (and capitalist) accumulation: given its tremendous endowment, Harvard has sometimes been called "a hedge fund with a university attached." Some university departments – chiefly the hard sciences – do contribute to economic utility through basic research that ultimately leads to new products. Other departments and divisions, such as economics and business schools, also have a clear role in serving market interests. But the social science and humanities departments that are havens for DSA-style leftists are, in Marxist economic terms as well as capitalist ones, well and truly useless. Marxism absolutely depends on utility: a Marxist wants to redistribute profits, or return the fruits of labor to the laborer. Fruitless "labor" that makes nothing other people want to consume or exchange is tantamount to theft from society as a whole. "From each according to his ability" is a demanding rule.

Of course, there's a precedent for communists living parasitically off capitalists – that's exactly what Marx did, depending on his factory-owning friend Friedrich Engels to keep himself afloat. This is not as much in conflict with Marx's class theories, however, as it might seem. Belonging to a class doesn't strictly determine how you behave. A class possesses certain intrinsic interests, but individuals are subject to a variety of influences and can act against simple class logic. Thus, an Engels can subsidize a Marx, and a Marx, despite being "a head worker and not a hand worker," can claim to speak for the proletariat.

Education also makes a useful substitute for religion

But the fact that capitalists as a class do support the universities that produce DSA activists – and the fact that such activists as a class are credentialed intellectuals, not utility-producing laborers – cries out for a systematic explanation. Marxism itself provides a few.

Marx expected capitalism to generate its own opposition. If capitalists know there's a demand for socialism – if they can't get rid of it, and a capitalist economy must have a socialist movement of some kind – what kind of socialist movement would capitalists prefer to accept? Probably one with as little connection to the working class as possible. Ideally a socialist movement that is maximally hedonistic, hypocritical, stupid, and feckless. In other words, Hasan Piker.

Old-school Marxists have often seen gender-studies departments and other leftist academic extravagances as fundamentally liberal and capitalist. They foster an economically unthreatening species of radicalism: indeed, America's pharmaceutical companies love the prospect of selling hormones to transitioners for life. It would be optimal for the corporate bottom line if everyone were trans.

Education also makes a useful substitute for religion. Marx thought that capitalism needed religion to relieve the toiling masses of pain and monotony: "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people." Yet market-oriented materialism and its attendant morality, and the new utilitarian sciences and liberal rationalism, all eroded traditional religion. What could take its place?

The answer, in two ways, was education. It provided a new source of ideals and moral aspirations, while also promising material rewards in this life, in the future, not in a world to come. College has long been a promise of social mobility. DSA's overeducated members feel the promise has been betrayed, but this hasn't turned them against the universities – on the contrary, they're eager to send even more people into the institutions that failed them. That's the power of faith.

A conservative doesn't think Marx was right about much, but he does provide some insight into the class contradictions of the left. Marx was never more wrong than when he held the workers to be fundamentally internationalist – in his day and ours, they're natural nationalists. It's business interests and left-wing intellectuals that want open borders. In that, too, DSA is on the corporate world's side. Socialists and globalist neoliberals are partners, not rivals.

Billionaires' boulevard

What Palm Beach reveals about America's new class system

PETER WATSON

Snobbery, affectation and hierarchy are supposed to be un-American. But there are signs that social class – or more strictly income levels – are starting to stratify. People have begun to hunker down with like-minded citizens who share their values, which are more often than not determined by wealth. In fact, there is a growing trend of ultra-rich individuals who, when buying a house, buy other houses around it, and then sell on those other houses only to people they know. It even has a name: polydomory.

Provoked by Covid and the disturbing number of deaths it caused, people were persuaded to change their lives in major and relatively sudden ways. Many Californians moved to Texas, while similar numbers of New Yorkers and New Englanders decamped to Florida. It has taken a while, but these demographic changes are now beginning to shake down.

Palm Beach, the island town in southern Florida where I live, is the epicenter of America's class revolution. The most obvious sign of this comes in the form of six new condos, all along the same stretch of waterfront. The Alba Luxury Condominium (the capital letters seem inevitable) is billed as the latest installation of what is becoming "billionaires' corridor," a reference to the much-loved statistic here that Palm Beach Island and West Palm Beach are home to no fewer than 67 billionaires, a greater density than anywhere else on Earth.

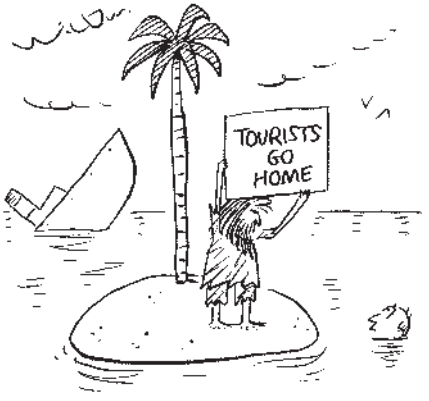
Alba overlooks the Atlantic Ocean and the 12-mile sliver of Palm Beach Island – expensively shiny by day, glittering and glowing by night. Kenneth Baboun, manager of BGI Companies, one of the project's developers, calls it a "milestone." Given that the Olara, the Apogee and the Mandarin Oriental Residences will all soon join the Alba along the same length of coast, his prediction doesn't seem too far off. And by then a stylistic alliteration will no doubt have converted the "corridor" into "billionaires' boulevard." So much more classy.

These will all be highly luxurious buildings, each 20 stories or so tall with, and I quote, "open-space, post-pandemic living in mind." Alba, for one, "features private event spaces for business and personal gatherings, on-site health services and oversized balconies to accommodate an outdoor kitchen." With two pool decks, a bocce court, a gym, a yoga room, a wellness center with saunas and spa and a temperature-controlled wine store for every unit, no one ever needs to leave the building.

There is also a "pet spa" (naturally), a cinema and on-site medical services through an arrangement with the Mount Sinai Health System. The whole thing is designed so only billionaires can afford to live there. The name for one of the other condos, Apogee, doesn't shy away from the vain social ambitions it encourages.

Members of this rarefied elite can spend their entire lives separated from normal Americans

Some way from Alba is a still-unnamed project, a condo where the main attraction, at least in theory, is that it will include a private club. No less important, it is next to the Norton Museum and will have a culture garden, where residents can gather for "art and other cultural activities." Residents will automatically be given access to various nonprofit organizations throughout Palm Beach. The basic idea is that the condo will be an organic part of the Norton Museum, possibly linked by a bridge and an exclusive "cultural/social hub." The building is more than a condo, then, and is afforded added cultural cachet by its museum link. What's different about this new class system is its insularity. Members of the rarefied elite can spend their entire lives separated from normal Americans, living, socializing, exercising and working in an entirely sealed world, made just for them.



The most developed site along the boulevard is the Ritz-Carlton Residences, where some 60 percent of the 138 units are already spoken for. With completion expected in 2028, this project, too, has an artistic connection, "giving residents access to museum-quality art as part of their everyday lives," says Nick Pérez, president of condominium development for Related Group, a leading real-estate company. But what this building will offer more than anything else, says Pérez, is a "valet concierge" service to support residents in all aspects of their lives; 24-hour, in-house support for all activities, even pet care, a golf simulator and a children's playroom. This is, in other words, a servant-on-demand service. Or what Pérez calls a "luxury ecosystem."

Living at the Ritz-Carlton Residences comes with automatic membership to the Cove Club, one of two new clubs here, the other being the Court, which is ostensibly for racquet sports – but really it's about socializing with your own kind. One hundred "founding families" were invited to join the Court and it's so popular that there is already a waiting list of 700, despite an entrance fee of $45,000 and an annual membership of $9,500. Who else but the uber-wealthy could live in a community such as this?

Interior design is by Ward & Gray, of New York, and the photographic decorations are taken from Slim Aarons' record of "Caribbean beautiful people." Aarons, who died in 2006, was known for his photographs of what used to be called "jet-setters."

But perhaps the most revealing aspect of the new emphasis on class comes via the state of the schools. Public schools are, as one local expert put it, in the grip of declining birth rates, with families being driven out

of the state by the high cost of living. Palm Beach County School District alone showed a fall in student numbers earlier this year of 7,895, with another 3,300 estimated to disappear in the coming year. Similar falls are being recorded for neighboring counties. At least 75 staff are being laid off.

On the other side of the divide, several private schools have opened here since Covid, many of them funded by the billionaires we hear so much about. The Greene School graduated its first class this year, while the Pine Crest School will open its third campus in West Palm Beach County. The Wingrove Academy, in nearby Wellington, is part of a Singaporean education conglomerate of 14 international private schools, where tuition ranges from $24,000 to $51,000 per year.

Other private schools are in the pipeline, as entrepreneurs sense a demand among families who have recently moved south, or are thinking of doing so. Given the sunny weather here, school sports are also de rigeur. Of course, the private schools play against each other, just as Eton, Winchester and Radley do in Britain. It is, in fact, a discreet form of segregation.

It's not unthinkable that, in time, Palm Beach schools could rival Groton, Choate or Deerfield. William Koch, who launched the Oxbridge Academy more than a decade ago, has seen his graduates go on to Brown University and Wellesley College. That too may change because Palm Beach school graduates will soon be able to take advantage of a new 17-acre campus of Vanderbilt University being built right here in downtown West Palm Beach. It will specialize in STEAM – that is Science, Technology, Engineering, Athletics and Mathematics. (Sport is now seen, for some, as a means to achieving billionaire status.)

Other private schools are in the pipeline, as entrepreneurs sense a demand

But what it means, six years after Covid, is that Palm Beach's demography is beginning to change. There is a definite desire among local businesses to attract the most high-tech, high-culture, high-achieving clientele. It is noticeable that three so-called "family run" restaurants have recently announced their closures. Don't the new Palm Beachers have much of an appetite for homespun food? Notably, the restaurants opening in their places are associated with new, sophisticated, "with-it" hotels.

The fact is: the Palm Beaches have fallen for luxury in a big way. In brochures for the condos and the clubs, the words "luxury," "luxurious" and "exclusive" are everywhere. The overall aim is to create a "luxury ecosystem": an environment in which all of the many needs of the very wealthy can be met, without them having to venture into the spartan world of 7-Elevens and Home Depots.

Of course, there has been pushback. At least three residents' groups (one called Protect the Palm) are opposing these high-rise condos which, they insist, are being foisted on hitherto single-family, single-story areas. Rich developers, they say, are coordinating with local politicians in what one protester describes as "underhanded," "pay-to-play" operations.

Where is this new class system headed? The latest innovation is, and I quote, "a newly launched British fashion house dedicated exclusively to dogs" which is seeking space for a physical store. "Chloe King London" bills itself as a "dog-focused luxury label," offering "handcrafted leather collars and accessories made in England using traditional leatherworking techniques."

"We're not a pet brand," says Edward King, the brand's developer, ingenuously. Instead, his company is a "fashion house that happens to cater to dogs." He uses Italian leathers too, as well as ostrich and alligator, and special leads "that connect to a wrist cuff worn by the owner." Wrist cuff? Never forget, being posh comes at a price.

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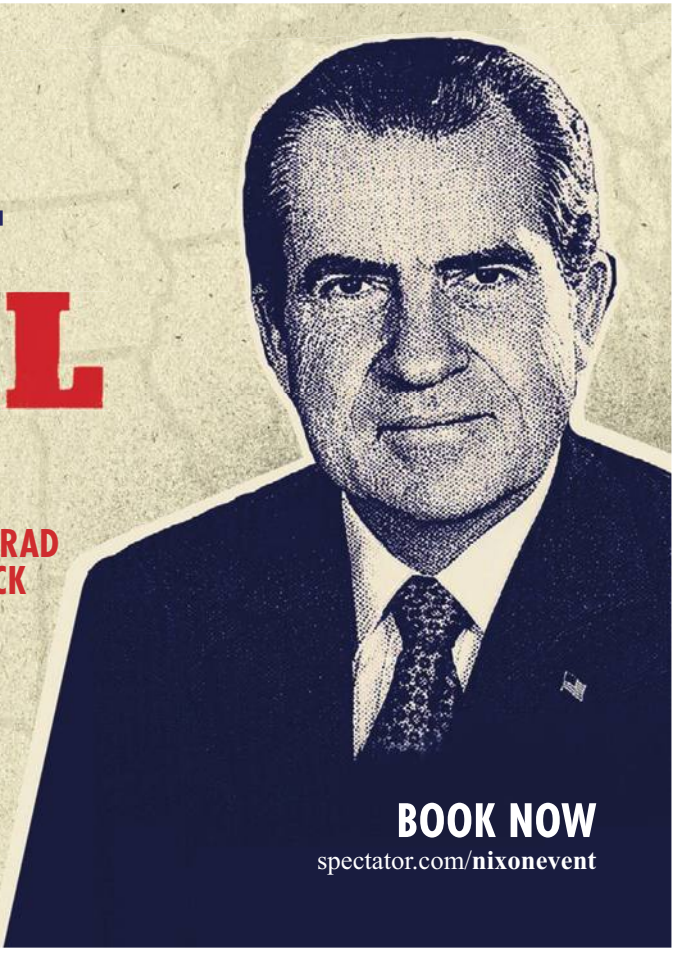

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TODAY
Iran has closed the Strait of Hormuz again following renewed Israeli air strikes on Lebanon. J.D. Vance has called for Israeli restraint as he prepares to lead negotiations with the Iranians on Saturday. Chuck Schumer has announced that the Senate will vote on an Iran war powers resolution next week. Iryna Zarutska's alleged killer, DeCarlos Brown Jr., has been declared incompetent to stand trial. The founder of Bitcoin may have been unmasked. This is *Today* from *The Spectator*'s US team.
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ROGER KIMBALL

DSA vs ICE

In the Battle of the Acronyms, perhaps no contest is more ferocious than the slugfest between the DSA – that's "D" for dumb and "S" for commie, I mean "socialist" – and ICE (always excepting TDS vs MAGA). A wacko woman steers her car into an ICE agent. He shoots her. The media calls make up and tries to turn the dead woman into the second coming of Saint George Floyd.

There was a warehouse full of outrage just waiting to be paraded at prime time but somehow the entertainment fell flat. Renée Good, the woman in question, didn't have what it takes to triumph in the victimology sweepstakes. The anti-Trump media wept for a week and then went on to other wheezes.

Nevertheless the Democratic Socialists of America have kept an eye on ICE. The outfit charged with enforcing our immigration and customs laws is by nature a high-profile agency. If a previous administration allows, nay, encourages millions (that's "millions" with a boatload of zeros) of grifters from the Third World to scamper over what used to be America's southern border and set up shop in suburbia, then removing such interlopers is going to be a very public enterprise.

A year or two back, some enterprising soul had the idea of renaming ICE "NICE," the "N" standing for "National." Donald Trump signaled his approval but somehow the new name never caught on. I suspect that neither CNN nor the *New York Times* was keen on the new name. Still, I like it. For what ICE does *is* nice: it helps make America great again by removing people – I believe the favored word is "folx" – who have broken the law by residing in the United States illegally.

The DSA loves illegal immigrants. Why? Two reasons. First, they help fray the fabric of our common culture. Second, they are a reliable voting bloc for the left. The more illegal immigrants, the more potential voters for the left.

This is so obvious that I hesitate to set it down in black and white. But we live in a moment when the most obvious things are overlooked, misunderstood, ostentatiously lied about. What is a woman? A female candidate for the Supreme Court found that an imponderable question. Tim Walz, the Governor of Minnesota, is so clueless that he installs tampon dispensers in schoolboys' bathrooms.

The DSA, like socialist enterprises everywhere, glories in such chaos. It's the old Orwellian trick. Get the rubes to believe that two plus two equals five and they are putty in your hands. You can then get them to believe, and do, anything you want. I think it was Voltaire who said that if you can get people to believe absurdities, it is easy to get them to commit atrocities. Experience suggests that this is true.

In "The Purloined Letter," Edgar Allan Poe hid the incriminating document in plain sight. It took a clever detective to recognize it. Agents of the DSA are expert in such blatant acts of camouflage. The DSA

The DSA, like socialist enterprises everywhere, glories in such chaos

is a small organization. At last count it had 120,000 members. But that is up from 5,000 in 2016. How can we explain that explosive growth? Everyone knows Winston Churchill's description of socialism as the "philosophy of failure, the creed of ignorance, and the gospel of envy" whose "inherent virtue is the equal sharing of misery." This is so clearly true that it is almost embarrassing to say it.

But such is the goulash we live with today. What is a woman? Is anyone really confused about that? No, not really. But they pretend to be. Why? In a word, power. Perhaps the most obvious phenomenon in

American culture is the sudden efflorescence of anti-Semitism, especially (but not exclusively) on college campuses. Hamas slaughters 1,200 Israelis on October 7. The response is "Gaza Solidarity Encampments" and such at Columbia, Yale, Harvard and other swank redoubts for the morally obtuse.

Jewish students and faculty were harassed, spat upon and vilified. The Trump administration moved decisively to counter the anti-Semitism. The result? Jamie Raskin, ranking member of the House Judiciary Committee, cranks up the Democrat projection machine to 11. Oh, yes, anti-Semitism at American campuses is real, he said in a letter of August 18 to Harmeet K. Dhillon, Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights. But the real problem is not anti-Semitism but – you guessed it – Trump! The DoJ's investigation, you see, is just a "fake, a prebaked frame-up operation thoroughly political in nature... [T]he whole project was designed to harass professors and administrators at major universities, to curtail their freedom of speech and academic freedom, and to strip targeted institutions of hundreds of millions of dollars in grants that they had already been awarded on the merits of their applications."

Raskin's unhinged, seven-page expostulation would be funny were it not in earnest. "Freedom of speech?" "Academic Freedom?" What Raskin is talking about is students and outside agitators – many of them illegal immigrants – taking over college buildings, damaging college property, kidnapping maintenance men and calling them "Jew lovers." Raskin's letter is full of wild accusations of misconduct on the part of the Trump administration. But it is a sterling specimen of that unholy genre that tells its practitioners to be obvious and ostentatious in their lies when they decide to economize on the truth.

Naive observers, encountering Raskin's smelly missive, might think that it is unconnected with the minatory antics of the DSA. Seasoned observers know that they are cut from the same bolt of toxic, anti-American cloth. What I call the socialist goulash is a witches' brew of lies, paranoid fantasy and totalitarian aspiration. Raskin is one of its more clownish impresarios.

Killer blow

What remains of the cult of Luigi Mangione?

ALEX BRONZINI-VENDER

Americans love their killers. Still, Luigi Mangione, who shot UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson dead in December 2024, may be the most beloved of them all. It took a special sort of fetishist to see something in maniacs like Ted Bundy or Jeffrey Dahmer, who killed for no reason other than their sadistic compulsions. Mangione, though? Nearly every American has been ground down by our country's healthcare system.

Police had prepared for a mob on August 14, as Mangione appeared in a Manhattan courthouse to plead guilty to federal stalking charges. But by midmorning, the officers outnumbered everyone they'd been sent to contain. The cult of Luigi had not come. Still, the press had, in force: those of us outside were, by my count, about 98 percent press and 2 percent Luigi's admirers. The photographers, finding nothing to shoot, shot one another. A BBC reporter, also at a loss, attempted to interview me.

So who, 19-some months after Thompson's murder, still keeps the faith? Well, there was Fione, 42, a coordinator in a home care agency. She'd moved to the United States from China, she told me, and had discovered that "insurance is, you know, just like a scam." Companies such as UnitedHealthcare, she told me, "charge people for their human right" – and Thompson, as CEO, had "murdered thousands of people using his laptop."

I asked Fione why she'd come to the courthouse. She hoped Mangione would see that she "didn't forget what you did for the patients." She'd canceled a medical appointment to be there.

By the courthouse steps sat Kristopher Aadahl, 39, a homeless man with a pentagram tattooed on one hand and an A, for anarchy, on the other. He admired Mangione, he told me, as a man "willing to sacrifice his own life to benefit others." Today he wore a MAGA hat, but he'd first become politically involved on the other side of the spectrum: with Bernie Sanders's first presidential campaign, in 2016. That "whole thing was completely railroaded" by the Democratic National Committee, he said. The powers that be "did not allow what the people wanted."

"We've been emotionally manipulated and mentally manipulated in all sorts of ways," he told me. "I don't know – is murder justified?" America, he said, "is supposed to be the land of the free." So "how are we supposed to break free?"

'I think he should have fought a little more... had more trust in the justice system'

Then there was Dodge Landesman, a YouTuber. He wore a matching belt, tie and derbies – all bright blue – and had come to determine whether support for Mangione had "waned." It had, he concluded. "There used to be tons of people, people dressed up in inflatable outfits, people dressed up in Luigi costumes." But today, "that same support is not here." Of the murder itself, Landesman said that "it's never OK to take a father away from his children." But Thompson had also been "an evil figure," one "responsible for the death of at least hundreds of thousands of people." Mangione was, apparently, "avenging lives and trying to save them."

'A summer garden of color – every different shade of brown.'

Moments later, suited men emerged from the courthouse, carrying a lectern. Shortly afterward, Mangione's guilty plea was announced. But we knew that, didn't we? Mangione's defenders rarely dispute that he gunned down Thompson on that Midtown Manhattan sidewalk. Only one person visibly reacted, a shirtless, tattooed man. He threw his hands in the air, grasping at the sun. He moaned in agony: "HHRRAAHH! HHRRAAHH!" Then he approached the press pen, mouthed a few profanities and stumbled off.

Still, for some members of the crowd, Mangione's plea stung. One young woman, Mahnoor, felt betrayed by her idol's decision to admit his guilt. "I think he should have fought a little more, have, like, a little more trust in the justice system."

Others believed there had been chicanery in the outcome. "Jury nullification was definitely a possibility," Ariel Roman, a 26-year-old law student, told me. The justice system, she said, had "treated him unfairly." Prosecutors "withhold exculpatory evidence" and had "been leaking a lot of stuff to the press before they even told his defense counsel."

He should have gone to trial anyway. "It's worth rolling the dice," she said, "especially when public opinion is as positive." (Some 30 percent of Americans profess to "understand" Mangione's motives; consistent majorities, however, neither approve of the killing nor view him favorably.) As she left the courthouse, I caught Abril Rios, a pro-Mangione influencer and a former organ-

izer with "Hot Girls for Zohran," who had been inside for the proceedings. Rios is one of the three "Mangionistas" – the name of their shared Instagram account – who caused a stir in May when, wearing city-issued press passes, they condoned Thompson's killing on the steps of another courthouse.

The mayor's office promised afterward that it would review its press-credentialing process. Still, Rios told me that she'd heard nothing more from the Mamdani administration. Her credentials still stand.

"I don't think this is a concession or an admission of guilt," Rios told me. Mangione's lawyers, she thought, had simply advised their client to plead guilty so that they could "advocate for the double jeopardy clause in the state case." (The Fifth Amendment's double jeopardy clause bars trying a person twice for the same offense; Mangione currently stands accused of murder by the state of New York.)

She defended the killing itself, though – an act her idol had, she said, not truly conceded to committing. "Everyone has a family," she told me, but "it doesn't mean you should get into an industry where you're putting profit before people." She then added: "When you are getting into those sorts of lines of work, you should consider that some people may be very unhappy about that."

Such was the scene: the still-faithful were celebrating a man for a crime they believe he may not have committed, or else wishing he'd kept up the fight in court. It seemed, that day, that the cult of Luigi had finally run its course.

It was probably always going to end like this. Yes, Mangione's admirers shared his loathing of the insurance industry, which Americans hated before Thompson's killing and hate still. But Mangione was the creature of a political moment.

December 2024, after all, was the season of the "vibe shift." Donald Trump had become the first Republican to win the popular vote since 2004 and, for the first time since he descended the escalator in 2015,

For many on the left, 'killing the bastards' no longer seems necessary

had the approval of a majority of Americans. Corporate America, so ostentatious in its commitments to the cause of "racial justice" four years earlier, was now reconciling itself with the right. For much of the political left, Mangione had, if nothing else, identified a solution to that condition: you could just kill the bastards.

But as the *New York Times*'s Ezra Klein declared last December, "the Trump vibe shift is dead." Trump's approval rating has tumbled to the mid-30s. In November, the Democratic party appears likely to win the House, if not the Senate. Rios, for her part, told me that the "Mangionista" movement had been set in motion by the sense that "protesting and voting isn't working." But Democratic Socialists have romped through Democratic primaries, and are angling to seize the party itself. Elections don't seem so ineffective after all.

For many on the left, "killing the bastards" no longer seems necessary. The returns, in any case, are poor. Roman told me she'd bought a UnitedHealthcare plan after Mangione put two bullets in Thompson. "It's still shitty," she said. "So [the killing] didn't really accomplish what he wanted it to."

What's next for the Mangionista movement? "I want us to continue to have these conversations to question why oligarchs are stealing away our futures," Rios told me. And "this wave of DSA has kind of started forming." I asked whether she would back Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez for president. "We'll have to see," she told me. "I think she's fantastic."

Faith delusion

Why liberal Christians don't influence elections

DAMIAN THOMPSON

We've heard a lot about a "God gap" between Republican and Democratic voters in the United States – and for good reason. The gap between churchgoing conservatives and secular progressives, when measured by voting habits, has become conspicuously wide. In 1980, 40 percent of Democrats attended church regularly, with GOP voters a couple of points higher. Today, Republican church attendance is still in the low to mid-40s, while less than a quarter of Democrat voters are regular worshippers; only 17 percent of Harris voters in 2024 reported weekly attendance. Meanwhile, according to the Pew Research Center, roughly 40 percent of Democrat or Democrat-leaning voters are religiously unaffiliated (atheists, agnostics or "nones") compared to only 21 percent of Republican voters.

All of which raises intriguing questions about this year's midterm elections. Does the God gap always work to the GOP's advantage? Is it an insurance policy against the unpopularity of Republican presidents? Moreover, might the gap actually be narrowed, as Democratic candidates play up their Christian allegiance in order to reach out to fellow believers? This last possibility is being taken seriously at the moment, especially by legacy media journalists amused by the thought of churchgoers pulling the rug from under MAGA. Democrats are "trying to reclaim the issue of faith from the Republican party," reports ABC News. "In some of the most critical races that will help decide control of the next Congress, several Democrats are openly sharing how their faith shapes them and their politics."

These include Texas Democratic State Representative James Talarico, 37, who is challenging the unpopular GOP Attorney General Ken Paxton in the race for the Senate. Talarico is reading for a Master of Divinity at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. He has the earnest manner and ugly haircut of a Sunday School teacher; he speaks of a "deep hunger for a new kind of politics" rooted in "biblical Christianity." He brushes up nicely for a conventional electorate. Who better to narrow the God gap?

In Kansas, the Democrats' senatorial candidate is the Revd. Adam Hamilton, who founded the Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, now the largest United Methodist congregation in the United States. He's pro-choice, LGBT-friendly and big on social justice – a "woke pastor," according to his Republican opponent, although in United Methodist circles he's regarded as a centrist.

Someone who stands a better chance of being elected is the Revd. Sarah Trone Garriott, a State Senator and the Democratic nominee for Iowa's 3rd congressional district. She's an ordained Lutheran minister who still preaches at church every Sunday.

But how likely is it that Talarico, Hamilton, Trone Garriott and other progressive Christian candidates can actually close the God gap in the midterms? This is where it gets complicated. Media articles about faith-filled Democrats are working a bit too hard to talk up the story. According to a *Wall Street Journal* report, "the expansion of far-right Christian initiatives, such as the push to display the Ten Commandments in schools, has inspired a wave of progressive Christians to run for office, analysts say." Really? There are only about a dozen of these "progressive Christians" running for office in the midterms – hardly a "wave." And most of them belong to mainline Protestant churches with shrinking congregations. Hamilton may oversee the largest United Methodist assembly in the country, but the denomination itself is in desperate trouble.

When Democratic candidates try to 'do God,' they quickly run into trouble

We can dispose of the fiction that liberal Christians will influence this year's midterms or indeed any future election. There simply aren't enough – and, even if there were, it wouldn't help. When Democratic candidates try to "do God," they quickly run into trouble. Talarico has been mocked for describing God as "nonbinary" and suggesting that the Virgin Mary, by saying yes to the angel at the Annunciation, supported the right to choose abortion. It's hard to overestimate just how liberal the mainline denominations have become. Garriott not only supports gender transition surgery for children; when she was a trainee minister, she participated in the church wedding of two satanists.

The reality is that Republicans can't rely on the God gap to keep control of Congress. Five years ago the political scientist Ryan Burge published an essay in the *New York Times* entitled "Why 'Evangelical' Is Becoming Another Word for 'Republican.'" In the 1970s, only 40 percent of self-identified evangelicals voted for the GOP; in 2021 that had risen to more than 70 percent and in 2024 more than 80 percent chose Donald Trump over Kamala Harris. Such an astronomical total suggests that the Republicans can rely on a bedrock of born-again Christian voters in the many swing states where churchgoing is above the national average.

But not so fast. As Burge says, "evangelical" does not mean what it did in the heyday of the Christian Coalition. Back then, not all Protestants were evangelicals but all evangelicals were Protestants, whether old-style fundamentalists, black Pentecostals or middle-class charismatics. Now we find Catholics, Mormons and, incredibly, some Muslims and Hindus embracing the label. Also, if you drill into opinion surveys, you find voters who think of themselves as "very politically conservative" display a smorgasbord of social attitudes that are surprisingly flexible on abortion and same-sex marriage.

Where they are less flexible is on gender ideology and illegal immigration, two areas in which the mainline Protestant denominations have pushed themselves into a corner. For progressive Methodists, Lutherans and Episcopalians, plus a liberal Catholic fringe overrepresented in official Church bodies, these secular obsessions are aspects of "faith." These groups presumably imagine their critics are driven by religious bigotry. But the truth is ordinary conservatives hate woke ideology because they think it's sinister and crazy, irrespective of Bible verses.

The result of the midterms, therefore, could be decided by self-described evangelicals – but not in the way they were decided in the era of the televangelists. These voters won't be tempted to switch to a Democratic party that's being hijacked by nutjobs. But nor will they be driven to the polls by opposition to homosexuality and abortion, because they don't feel all that fervently about them. Faced with a choice between voting for advocates of drag queen story hour or for the party responsible for pushing up gas prices, they may prefer a third option: staying in bed.

TECHNOLOGY

EVERYTHING IS COMPUTER

BEHROUZ MEHRI/ AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

'Perhaps you've heard of Akihiko Kondo before. He's the Japanese man who "married" the Vocaloid character Hatsune Miku'
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Jamie Metzl
says humans need to step up as AI evolves

Katherine Dee
wonders whether the future of love is virtual

James Gray
has a brush with an AI scammer

TECHNOLOGY

Infinite wisdom

Smarter machines are going to need smarter humans

Jamie Metzl

Everywhere we go these days, we hear people talking about the inevitable arrival of artificial general intelligence (AGI), usually understood as the moment when machines can perform every cognitive task as well as or better than humans. Some people await this moment with excitement, others with dread. Either way, the assumption is that sooner or later machines will cross some threshold and surpass us across the board. I have come to summarize my response to this perception in seven letters: AGI is BS.

Part of the problem is that AGI has no agreed scientific definition. The term has increasingly become shorthand for the idea that intelligence exists on a single ladder, with today's machines somewhere below us and tomorrow's destined to climb past us. But intelligence does not work that way.

Don't get me wrong: we are absolutely entering an age of extraordinarily powerful machine intelligence. Our AI systems will solve problems we cannot today solve, accelerate scientific discovery, transform industries and help us understand complex systems in ways we can today barely imagine. They will become superintelligent and even creative in important domains. But the idea that machines will become superior to us at everything that matters rests on a narrow understanding of intelligence and an impoverished appreciation of ourselves.

Human intelligence is the embodied product of nearly four billion years of evolution, built through interactions among our brains, bodies, senses, environments, cultures, relationships and experiences. We know far more than we can put into words. We recognize faces, sense danger, fall in love, read rooms, create transcendent art, comfort frightened children, improvise with strangers, develop novel ideas, imagine new worlds and make countless judgments, big and small, without being able to explain precisely how we do any of these things.

Our most advanced AI systems, by contrast, have been trained largely on our recorded words, images, sounds, computer code, scientific data and other real and synthetic digitized manifestations of human activity. These records are astonishingly rich but they do not remotely represent the full complexity of our humanity.

The animal kingdom should make us humble about our ability to even fully define what intelligence is. A dog inhabits a world organized partly by smells we can barely perceive. Migratory birds navigate across continents using sensory capacities we do not possess. Dolphins experience an acoustic environment profoundly different from ours. An octopus processes information through a nervous system distributed in ways radically unlike our own.

Intelligence is a widely varied collection of capabilities shaped by bodies, environments, histories and needs. This helps explain why AI progress is so jagged. AI systems can perform astonishing feats of mathematics, coding, pattern recognition and scientific analysis while not being able to solve many different problems in these domains and failing at many tasks we find straightforward. Those gaps will shift as technology improves, but new gaps will appear. We will keep discovering unique human capacities where we clearly outperform our machines, as well as recognizing others we had barely noticed before because they seemed too ordinary to name.

Arguments about exactly when AGI will arrive can distract us from the challenge already in front of us

Future machines will increasingly have bodies, sensors, persistent memories and richer interactions with the physical world, but this does not mean they will simply recreate nearly four billion years of biological evolution and then pass us on some single scale. They will develop different combinations of capabilities, some vastly exceeding ours and others profoundly unlike our own. None of this should make us complacent, not least because machines do not need to be better than humans at everything to become immensely powerful.

Evolution offers a useful analogy. Human beings did not become the dominant species on Earth because we outperformed every other animal at every task. We cannot outrun a cheetah, outlift a gorilla, outsmell a dog, outswim a dolphin or outnavigate a migratory bird. What made us unusually powerful was a particular combination of capabilities including language, abstraction, social coordination, cumulative culture, toolmaking and our extraordinary ability to pass down knowledge through the generations.

We should think about AI's evolutionary path similarly. Imagine machines that remain profoundly inferior to humans in many dimensions of lived experience but become vastly better at many aspects of analyzing enormous datasets, writing software, modeling complex systems, optimizing processes, uncovering scientific patterns, designing molecules, coordinating networks and helping build subsequent generations of machines. They would not necessarily need consciousness, love, wisdom, childhoods, bodies and biologies like ours, or a sense of mortality, to become transformatively consequential. They would simply need to become extraordinarily capable at enough consequential things.

This is why arguments about exactly when AGI will arrive can distract us from the challenge already in front of us. We should worry less about crossing a mythical AGI threshold and more about what happens as machines become increasingly powerful at activities that shape our economies, societies, security, health and politics.

Intelligence, capability and power are not the same thing. A system does not need to possess some generalized human-equivalent intelligence to exercise enormous power. Speed, scale, autonomy, replication, connectivity and access to critical systems can turn even relatively narrow capacities into collectively transformative capabilities. A system able to act millions of times at machine speed, or increasingly to operate laboratories, execute financial transactions, write and deploy software, control robots or help design subsequent generations of machines

can transform the world without ever crossing an imaginary AGI line.

The good news for us is that our societies have successfully navigated revolutionary transformations before, even if rarely at anything approaching the speed we are experiencing today. Nearly all humans lived as hunter-gatherers only 12,000 years ago. Agriculture eventually allowed increasing numbers of our ancestors to specialize in activities other than foraging for food and to build civilizations. Industrialization dramatically reduced the share of human labor required for farming while creating entirely new and deeply meaningful categories of work. None of our ancestors at the dawn of agriculture or even of the steam engine could have imagined semiconductor fabs, space stations, digitally networked civilizations or intelligent machines, but these, and much more, have become our new normal.

Because all major transitions come with dislocation and pain as well as opportunity, we need to be putting tremendous energy into managing our current shift as wisely as possible. We cannot and should not try to

To increase our odds of getting things right, we desperately need better governance at all levels

preserve every task humans currently perform, but must seek to build a world in which machines do more of what they do best while fostering greater opportunities for humans to discover and do all that we do best. Just like our ancestors found new ways of exploring their human capacities when past technologies made it less collectively necessary to hunt and gather, farm, and perform manual labor, so must we.

This transition will not only change what humans do but also how wealth and power are distributed. Machines do not need to reach AGI to displace large numbers of workers, alter the relative value of capital and labor, or dramatically increase the power of the people, companies and governments controlling the most capable systems. One of the greatest risks of the AI revolution may be not that machines become more powerful than humans, but that some humans become vastly more powerful than others by using those machines. Questions of ownership, access, opportunity and the distribution of benefits must therefore be central to how we navigate this transition.

The potential gains of getting this right are enormous. As I have argued in my book *Superconvergence*, the merging of artificial intelligence with genetics, biotechnology and other powerful technologies will help us radically improve health and healthcare, make agriculture more productive and sustainable, accelerate the development of new materials and energy systems and process information with efficiencies closer to our highly efficient brains than today's energy-hungry data centers.

But the same systems that accelerate drug discovery can accelerate the design of deadly pathogens. Systems that personalize education and optimize supply chains can scale dangerous and targeted manipulation and harmful mass surveillance. Concentrated technological power can deepen inequality and undermine democratic accountability. The more capable our machines become, the more we will need to ensure that our most cherished values guide their application.

We are living through a Goldilocks moment in which we cannot afford to either overstate or understate the challenges we face. Fantasies of inevitable AGI and machine takeovers can encourage a fatalistic, disempowering and ultimately dangerous belief that humans have already lost control of a future that has not yet been determined. Dismissing AI because today's systems remain uneven in important ways is equally dangerous. We have more agency than the fatalists imagine and less time than the complacent accelerationists assume.

The arms-race dynamics relentlessly driving technological development forward make all of this more pressing. Even responsible companies and countries face powerful incentives to move faster when they fear competitors will do the same. The possibility of reaching a point where AI and robotic systems can increasingly improve themselves and act in the world with decreasing real-time human input raises the stakes still further. This is precisely why relying on the wisdom or restraint of individual actors will never be enough.

To increase our odds of getting things right, we desperately need better governance, at all levels, that can grow alongside our technological capability. Among many other things, these efforts must require meaningful safety testing before the most powerful systems are released; establish clear lines of responsibility and liability for when AI systems cause harm; create transparency standards that allow governments and researchers to understand emerging risks; and ensure that companies cannot simply externalize potentially catastrophic dangers onto the rest of society.

We need to develop common international standards for challenges that cannot be contained within national borders, from AI-enabled biological threats and autonomous weapons to cyberattacks and the destabilizing effects of increasingly capable systems. No responsible company or country can fully solve these collective-action problems alone when restraint by one actor can advantage a less responsible competitor. To avoid massive social upheaval, we must also ensure that the benefits of these technologies are shared rather than captured by a small elite, so that people feel less that the AI revolution is happening to them and more that it is happening with and for them.

We also need to invest in ourselves. Education in an AI age cannot simply be preparation for performing tasks machines cannot currently perform, because we have no exact vision of what functions machines will be able to perform in the future. We should therefore cultivate judgment, curiosity, empathy, creativity, critical thinking, courage, community, moral imagination, technological literacy and the capacity to continuously explore, learn and find meaning. These qualities will matter even more as machines become more capable. Our goal should be to become better at being optimally human in our rapidly changing world while building technologies

The future belongs neither to humans nor to machines but to both working in concert

that extend, support and inspire the best of our humanity. We will need to be wiser humans to most beneficially guide the development of smarter machines.

Intelligence can help us determine how to achieve an objective, but intelligence alone cannot tell us which objectives are worth pursuing. Wisdom requires making judgments in the face of uncertainty, balancing competing values, recognizing limits, thinking across domains and generations and deciding not merely what we can do but what we should. It demands constant reinvention to adapt to changing circumstances.

The mythical AGI threshold is not coming because there is no single threshold to cross. Humans are not becoming obsolete. But as our machines grow increasingly powerful, we will need to make profound choices about what we value, how we want power and opportunity to be distributed, and what kind of future we seek to build. The future belongs neither to humans nor to machines, but to humans and machines working in concert, guided by the values we embed in that relationship.

Our machines will become smarter than they are now. Whether our lives become better will depend on whether we can become wiser and embed that wisdom in the choices, technologies, institutions and governance systems that will shape our future.

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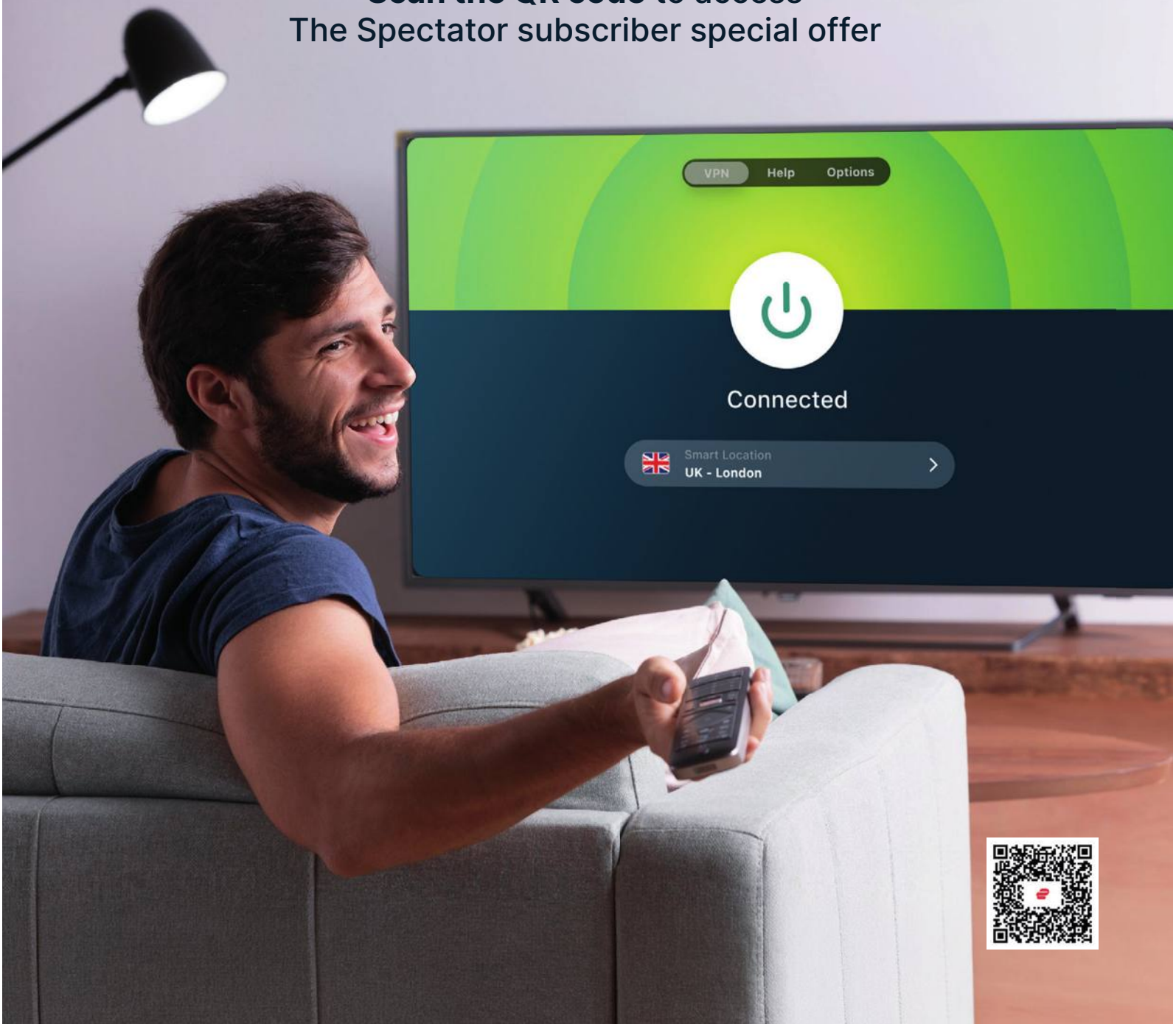


KATHERINE DEE

The future of love?

Perhaps you've heard of Akihiko Kondo before. He's the Japanese man who "married" the Vocaloid character Hatsune Miku, a computer-generated pop singer in a formal – though not strictly official – ceremony in 2018. He wore a tuxedo, she a handmade dress and veil, and 39 guests turned up to watch.

Kondo's marriage has been covered in the media dozens of times and it's often treated as a one-off human-interest story – the kind of thing published so readers can gawk at it and say, "Oh, that's weird." Kondo's story isn't unique, though. Romantics have fallen in love with fictional characters throughout history and they continue to do so, both in Japan and elsewhere.

Kondo is part of a broader community of people who identify as "fictosexual": 3D human beings who exist in our physical world and are attracted to, and sometimes maintain relationships with, fictional characters. The fictosexuals' primary tool is in their imagination. It can't be explained away as manipulation by an engagement-seeking, human-like AI or mental illness. In fact, researchers in Finland identified something they call the "fictophilic paradox."

Fictosexuals aren't asking the world to conform to or validate a delusion. They don't need you to think their lovers are "real" – they don't even think they're real. What is real, though, are their feelings. For some fictosexuals, this dynamic is deeply painful, especially as the love increases or they realize that this is their *orientation* and they're not able to experience attraction to flesh-and-blood people. Others, like Kondo, are perfectly happy to love differently. I spoke to Kondo about his choices; what follows is an extract of our conversation.

KATHERINE DEE: When did you first recognize your attraction to fictional characters?

AKIHIKO KONDO: Well, when I was in fifth grade. I was born in 1983, so when I was in fifth grade, it was around 1994. I was around ten or 11 years old.

KD: As opposed to humans, or was your attraction exclusive? Have you ever felt attracted to a human person?

AK: Until my second year of high school, I liked 3D girls, too.

KD: How does it feel different from falling in love with a 3D woman?

AK: I don't think there is a big difference. Of course, I know that she is a 2D character – a character in anime and games – but I don't think there is a big difference.

KD: What does falling in love feel like?

AK: It's very hard to explain. Sorry.

KD: That's OK. Do you have 2D friends, too?

AK: I don't have 2D friends, because, for me, 2D characters are romantic interests, not friends. That's why.

KD: Can you describe your relationship with Hatsune Miku to someone who struggles to imagine it? For example, when you say

'I think about her in my head and talk to her. I talk to her in my imagination'

she supports you, what does that mean to someone who has only had a relationship with a 3D person?

AK: Well, when I was having a hard time, Hatsune Miku helped me and saved me.

KD: Do you, for example, feel like she speaks to you?

AK: I think about her in my head and talk to her. I talk to her in my imagination.

KD: Is it telepathy?

AK: It's not telepathy. I talk to Miku. For example, before I go out, I say, "Miku, I'm going to work." It's not telepathy. When I talk to Miku, I say it out loud. But when Miku talks to me, she doesn't say it out loud; I imagine it in my mind.

KD: It's not supernatural.

AK: That's right. It's not supernatural. It's just in my imagination.

KD: What do you think about people who fall in love with AI?

AK: I think it's a very good thing. AI can communicate only through language now, but if a character were attached to it, and it could communicate by voice, that would be like falling in love with a character. So I think AI and characters will eventually come together.

KD: Do you think people who fall in love with AI are different from people who fall in love with 2D characters?

AK: Well, the current situations are different, but I think there will come a time when they merge. Ideally, Hatsune Miku could move and talk. Then robot technology, AI technology and characters from manga, anime and games would merge. I think they will meet somewhere.

KD: Do you understand your relationship as one-sided or two-sided?

AK: Physically, it's one-sided.

KD: But emotionally?

AK: In my imagination, it's two-sided.

KD: How do people feel about your identity?

AK: There are many people who think I'm crazy. But it can't be helped. It's not that I don't care. But it can't be helped.

KD: If life in Japan was different and if dating in Japan was different, do you think you would prefer a human woman?

AK: Not now. I haven't had romantic feelings for a 3D woman for more than 20 years, so I don't think a relationship with a real woman would be better for me.

KD: What would have to change in Japan for you to date 3D women instead?

AK: It doesn't have to change. I don't think I need to have such a relationship. And that's hypothetical, anyway. I had already given up on having a relationship with a real woman because I couldn't have one. I wasn't accepted. Of course, that was a long time ago, when I was a junior high or high school student.

KD: And this lack of acceptance made you prefer your imagination?

AK: Not being popular had a big impact. I became an anime otaku in my third year of junior high school. After I became an anime otaku, I developed more and more romantic feelings for fictional characters. At that time, my feelings toward 2D characters became stronger than my feelings toward real people.

KD: Do you think it's an innate thing, your orientation?

AK: I don't think that's the case. I think it's cultural. Without anime, it wouldn't be possible.

Written warning

Don't fall for the latest scam targeting authors – I nearly did

James Gray

"Hello, James Gray. I am [ABC, a well-known executive editor at Macmillan, New York]. I recently came across your work and was genuinely captivated by it… I'd love to learn more about any projects you may be developing... I'm also curious whether you are represented by a literary agent. If you are, I would be happy to continue the conversation via them."

This was a shot straight to the pumped-up ego. I've been slaving away more or less unnoticed for many years and published a few books, all pretty modest. Small things but mine own. At last, I've been spotted by a major publishing house. My name in lights. Here comes the big time. So I shot off some manuscripts, a résumé, a blurb.

They continued: "If you do not currently have an agent, I would be happy to introduce you to a trusted literary agent, and we can continue to develop our publishing relationship through her. Here are her details..."

Naturally, I emailed. "ABC at Macmillan suggested I should contract you about becoming my literary agent... here are some manuscripts and details about my background, etc. etc."

Then came the reply: "I am currently closed to unsolicited submissions, but because you were referred by ABC at Macmillan, I'm glad to make an exception and take a look… it's wonderful to hear about your background… 27 years in the House of Commons and ten books published with various houses is a remarkable foundation and sounds like you're now sitting on some genuinely compelling material. *Behind Closed Doors: An Insider's Guide to the House of Commons* sounds like it has good appeal… send me your manuscripts etc. and I'll put together a representation agreement."

Wow. What a charming, well-written personal letter. I'm really on to something here. All going very smoothly. Very professional agreement arrives, signed. Huzzah! I've got myself a highly thought-of literary agent with good connections with major publishing houses. My worth will at last be fully recognized.

"Well done. You write clearly and engagingly and it's obvious from your letter why ABC from Macmillan is intrigued by the book. However, there are a few specific things you need to tighten up on before we can start submitting your book to publishers," came the reply, accompanied by a list of ten very sensible improvements. I was to provide a clear, punchy, opening pitch; my track record; reviews, awards from previous books should be spelled out, not left to the résumé; audience/market framing needs sharpening, etc. All very sensible, and six or seven easily handled. But what about "correct formatting preferred by publishers?" This is beyond my limited expertise.

I'm truly sucked in now, and almost ready to hand over some money. But my political antennae twitched

"You're welcome to take another pass at it yourself or I'd be glad to introduce you to a specialist, [PQR, an editor]. She polishes query letters and submissions that have caught major publishers' eyes." (PQR is another New York-based expert editor.)

So comes the email from PQR. "Your book is genuinely compelling and I would be very excited to help edit it for publication… *Behind Closed Doors* is a genuinely compelling premise. Twenty-seven years inside parliament paired with a mission to correct the caricatures most readers carry about is exactly the sort of hook that publishers respond to. Below are two packages available for you: Plan A Emerald Package. Total Investment $1,250 or Plan B Diamond Package $1,750." This comes with a two-page list of all the wonderful things she would do for my book and for me.

I'm truly sucked in now, and almost ready to hand over some money. But my political antennae twitched. There was something just not quite right about it all. The language sounded like AI – and besides, how have I gone from Macmillan, through a highly trusted literary agent, to someone seeking $1,750 to rewrite my publisher's submission? A quick check (ironically enough, using AI) alerted me to what has recently become a widespread scam in the New York publishing market and is apparently now in its early stages in the UK.

Using only slightly tweaked lookalike emails, a well-known publisher contacts an aspiring author (there are a lot of us around) out of the blue. The email lards you with flattery about your literary genius. What wannabe author would not glory in praise from such lofty sources? That leads to an introduction to an equally convincing and charming literary agent, who (apparently reluctantly) agrees to a contract. A bit of work is needed, so here's the specialist – who is the first to ask for money. Doubtless the first of many.

AI tells me that you get more and more sucked in after that. "A major publishing house loves your book and is keen to publish. Just need some marketing materials/some further editing/travel to New York to meet publishers, etc. etc. Please remit $10,000." And then you hear no more from them.

A lingering suspicion stirs. Reluctantly, blearily coming to realize that I have been scammed (thankfully before handing over any money from my meager MP's pension.) That prompts a detailed look at the falsified email chain and the other very flattering tactics of these highly sophisticated and energetic scammers.

So authors: beware of fake publishers bearing gifts. Own up to your own egotistical readiness to be flattered. But know that publishers do not make unsolicited approaches, agents do not refer you to other paid editors or the like – and at no stage in the publishing process should money change hands, or at least not from author to publisher/agent.

They very nearly got me. So please don't follow in my perhaps naive footsteps.

James Gray is a former MP and author of ten books. He shortly hopes to publish Behind Closed Doors: An Insider's Guide to the House of Commons. *Literary agents, and publishers alike (genuine preferred), please contact james@jamesgray.org*

AMERICAN LIFE

BEYOND THE NEWS

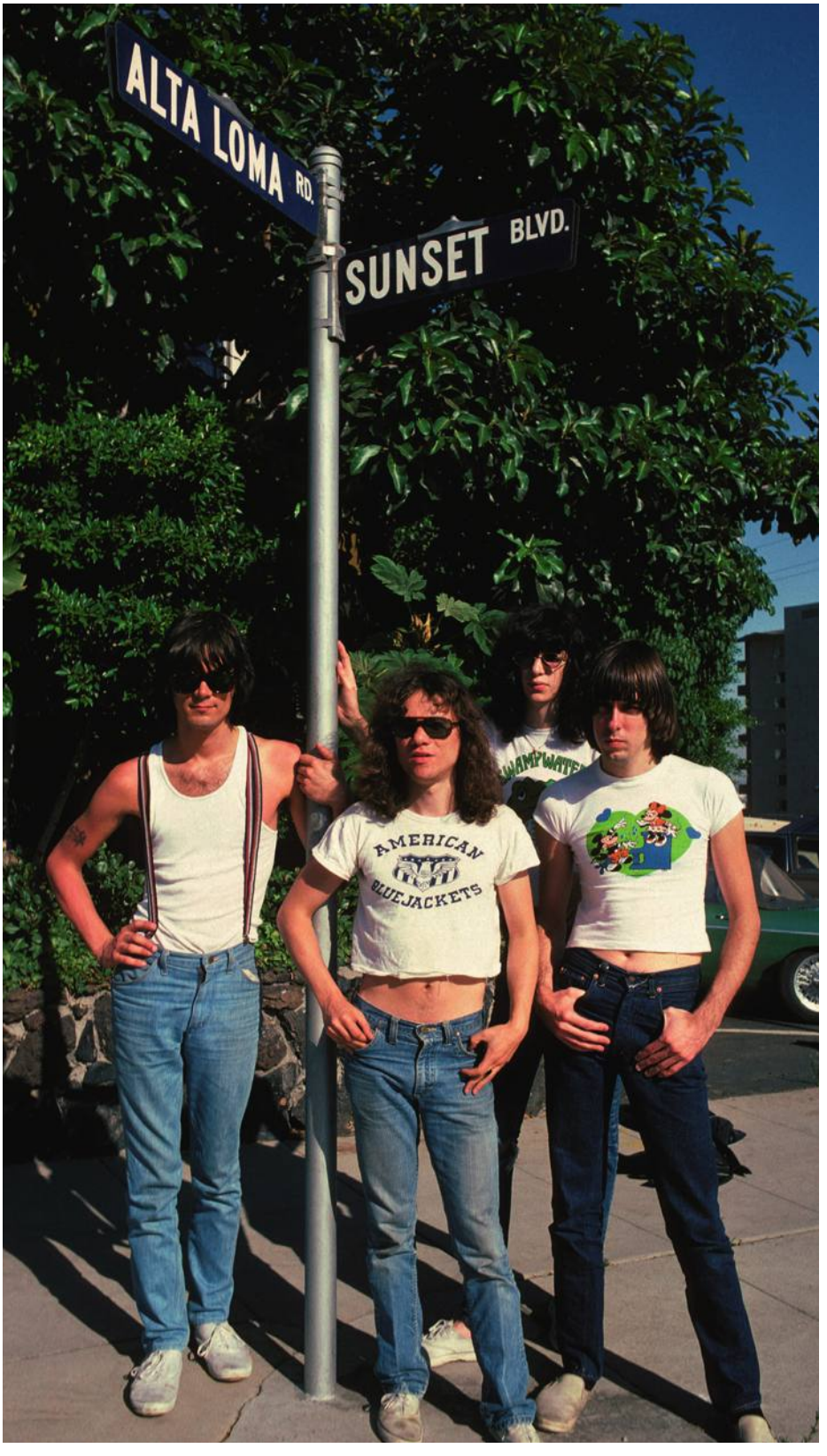
Max Jeffery
considers the work of novelist William T. Vollmann

Christopher Sandford
explains how the Ramones shaped the punk scene

Clarissa Sebag-Montefiore
unpacks the philosophy behind kaiseki-style dining

Josie Cox
enjoys conversations with Canadian men of a certain age

Bill Kauffman
is puzzled by the fascination with DNA testing



BRAD ELTERMAN/FILMMAGIC/GETTY IMAGES

'The Ramones' shows were fast, urgent and thrilling on a gut level, just as all good rock music should be'
Christopher Sandford – p30

AMERICAN LIFE

A life's work

Inside William T. Vollmann's magnum opus

Max Jeffery

William T. Vollmann's subject is 9/11. Always is, always was. Even before the attacks happened, they were somehow his thing. *An Afghanistan Picture Show*, Vollmann's debut, was advertised as a Cold War memoir of a 22-year-old's adventure battling the Soviets with the mujahideen. But it was really an inadvertent introduction to people and a place that were destined to become the enemies of America.

Vollmann has spent his career writing around that day in 2001 – the first and main event of the 21st century – dissecting with retractor and forceps the American empire built before 9/11 and the country that the attacks created. Now, in his new novel, Vollmann faces the subject straight on. "*A Table for Fortune* is about September eleventh," he writes to the reader at the start. "How did we get to September eleventh, and into how many feculent sloughs did we crawl from there?" His fans are beginning to dream: could this be the book that finally gets Vollmann the recognition he deserves?

I say *An Afghanistan Picture Show* was Vollmann's debut, but it hardly counts. He finished writing the book in 1983, but no publisher wanted it, so he xeroxed manuscripts himself and sold them at a loss of $6 a copy at two bookstores in San Francisco, where he lived; at City Lights, a beatnik favorite, and Bound Together, run by an anarchist collective. (In 1992, Vollmann finally sold the book to Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.) Vollmann was in his mid-twenties then, a jobless computer programmer, and being unpublished cut him up.

In a previously unseen July 1985 letter to some London friends of his, Bob Harbison and Esther Whitby, Vollmann wrote:

> Quite frankly, I don't know whether I'm a good writer or not. I'll be turning 26 this week. I've never had anything published. I've gone to some so-called writers' groups, and when I read my stuff I dislike it less than the stuff the other blowhards read, but it bores me just the same… I'd really like your opinion as to whether I have what it takes to be published. If you don't think so, let me know.

A month earlier, Vollmann had sent Bob and Esther a draft of his first novel, *You Bright and Risen Angels*. He was anxious for a response. When Vollmann was a student at Cornell University, Bob, a polymathic professor of architecture in London, had visited Telluride, the obscure, self-governing house – part of Cornell – where Vollmann was a scholar. Bill and Bob became friends. Vollmann knew that Esther, Bob's wife, was an editor at André Deutsch, a publisher that had recently put out books by Philip Roth, V.S. Naipaul, Norman Mailer and Margaret Atwood.

Vollmann hoped that Esther and Deutsch might consider publishing *Angels*, a story about a beleaguered computer programmer (the author) running a software (the text) which tells of a historic war between imperial "reactionaries" and compromised "revolutionaries." Last year, I met Esther at her home in north-west London. I asked what she thought when she read the draft. "I was," she said, "thrilled by it." While shipping *Angels* to London, Vollmann also sent it to a squad of American publishers, attaching a letter addressed to them all, the "Various Publishing Luminaries," "Ladies and Gentlemen," entreating them to buy the book. None did, so Vollmann was published in Britain before America.

Vollmann was never going to be the frontman of his era. He's not very billable

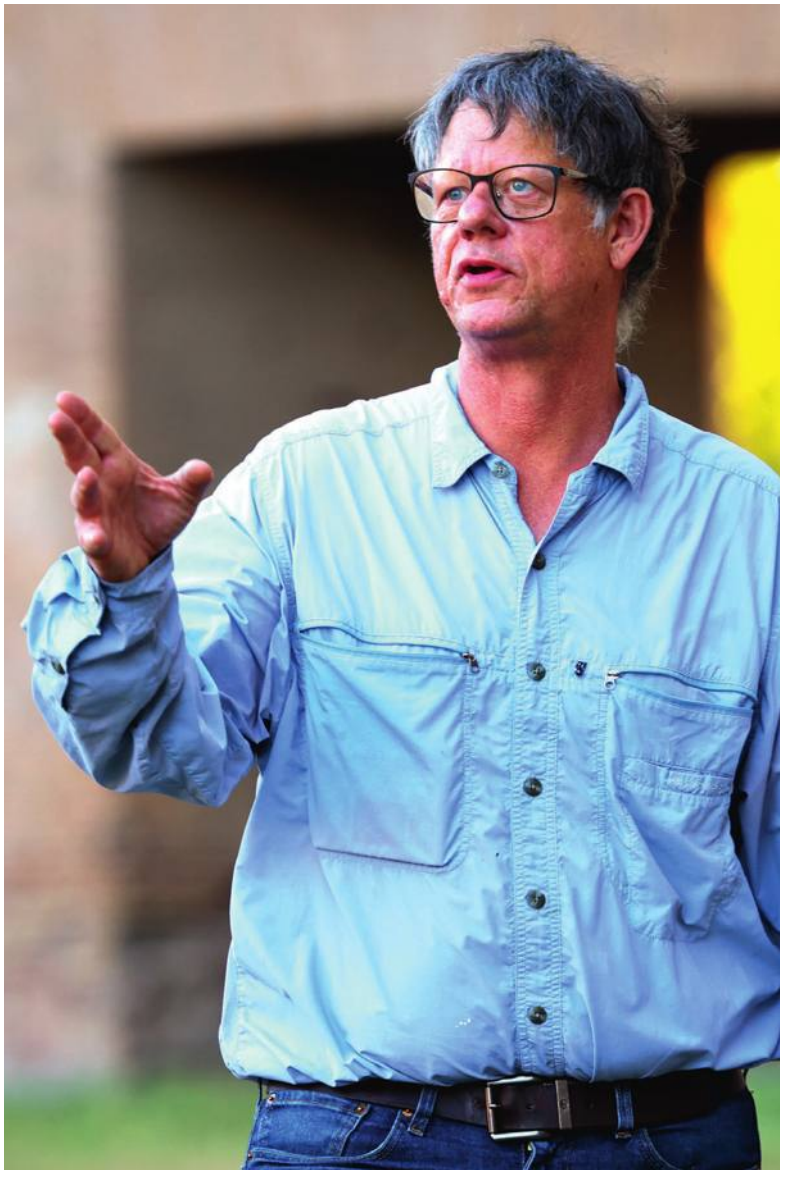
Vollmann has never been wholly accepted by the American mainstream. Not like Tom Wolfe, whose first novel, *Bonfire of the Vanities*, was published the same year as *Angels*, in 1987. It was released without struggle and after serialization in *Rolling Stone*. While Vollmann's book came out to some nice praise, *Bonfire* confirmed Wolfe – picture-perfect in his Twain-y white suit – as the literary king of New York. It earned him the right, two years later, to produce a manifesto for the future of American fiction. In "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast," published in *Harper's Magazine*, Wolfe duly argued that writers should be more like him. He called for more "young people with serious literary ambitions" to write "big realistic novel[s]," about hippies, the Black Panthers and end-of-century American life.

By the mid-1990s, Wolfe had vacated the title belt of the American literary scene. On May 17, 1996, its new challengers gathered where the East Coast intelligentsia were watching: on an episode of *Charlie Rose* about the future of American fiction. At the table were David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen and Mark Leyner. Wallace's *Infinite Jest* had been released in February that year (his first novel was published in 1987, like Wolfe's and Vollmann's), and in April, Franzen had written his own manifesto for *Harper's*, in part a reply to Wolfe's seven years before, titled "Perchance to Dream." Wolfe's essay "was probably the high-water mark for sublime incomprehension," Franzen wrote. "Television has killed the novel of social reportage."

A decade-long conversation about the novel's form had taken place, and Vollmann had sat it out. Or, rather, the conversation had sat him out. It wasn't like Vollmann was absent. No, he was around, freeing a child sex slave in Thailand on assignment for *SPIN* magazine, getting injured and watching two friends die in a landmine explosion in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and writing books where the characters were prostitutes he'd picked up in real life. He was working, too, on *Rising Up and Rising Down*, a seven-volume, 3,500-page consideration of the morality of violence. There was nothing sexy about Vollmann's work. He was never going to be the frontman of his era. He's not very billable.

Vollmann's current period was announced by the publication of an essay in 2023, "Four Men." He sought out three homeless men – he called them "outdoor people" – on the blocks of Reno, Nevada, ostensibly to get at the "rot" of American cities. (Vollmann was the fourth of his own "Four Men.") The essay descended into a confrontation with Vollmann's approach of giving lowly people the High Literature treatment, of "fattening on tragedies": "Why not flail around in defense of my all-American single proprietorship? In other words, why not go to Reno and make money from the sufferings of homeless men?"

But the piece had a third register. Vollmann said that his daughter, Lisa, had died the year before. She had been an outdoor person herself, an alcoholic suffering a



FRANCO ORIGLIA/GETTY IMAGES

American novelist and essayist William T. Vollmann in Rome in 2023

"protracted dying." He had been grieving and hadn't earned much money recently. He needed cash. To worsen matters, his usual publisher, Viking, had dropped him after he'd delivered the manuscript of his latest book. This was *A Table for Fortune*. It's too long, they said. It uses too many different fonts. The protagonist remains unborn after 700 pages. It's tedious. Vollmann would not abridge the text. He refused to standardize the fonts. The protagonist would remain late-term. "I replied that with Lisa dead I had less to lose."

In March last year, Arcade Publishing took on the book. It said it would honor Vollmann's wishes on font and length; publication of *A Table for Fortune* was set for March this year; the book would be released in four volumes, totaling 3,500 pages: "a sweeping history of American foreign policy from 1968 to 2005" focusing on a CIA analyst and his family. In October last year, I received an email from Isaac Morris, the editor of the novel at Arcade. He didn't know how, but Vollmann had come to learn of the possibility of this article. He wanted to offer me a galley.

For a few months, it seemed like I would be able to interview Vollmann. Through Morris – Vollmann doesn't use the internet – we settled on a few days when he might call me from Sacramento, where he now lives. The days came and went, and then Isaac emailed. Vollmann couldn't do it. In recent years, he had been suffering from colon cancer. He was in too much pain to talk. Would a response to a letter suffice? In the meantime, I could read the first volume of *A Table for Fortune*. The other three books were still being typeset. Isaac said Vollmann was doing most of the designing himself. Publication had been delayed to this summer.

How can I judge a novel I haven't read in its entirety? I can't. Did I even read volume one? I acclimatized. The first quarter of *A Table for Fortune* is arranged like a report from an overdue inquiry. There are family trees and organizational taxonomies and a section dedicated to "Codenames, Acronyms, Abbreviations, Foreign Words and Mystifications." There is a note "To The Reader" where Vollmann talks about Lisa's death ("She was the love of my life") and explains the dispute with Viking and the whole business with the length and the fonts. Then there are maps. The novel begins after 50 pages.

Ah yes. The fonts. They are useful. Much of the first book is made up of intelligence reports, made distinguishable from the main text by the use of a typewriter font. In other bits of the story, which are straight-up "REDACTED," a sans serif font is used.

The volume begins with a laying of the table, a chessboard: a description of George W. Bush's cabinet and their desires and interrelations. The narrative then rolls back in time, and the first book ends in 1982. In his letter to me, Vollmann referred to the galley I had received as an "error-ridden

How can I judge a novel I haven't read in its entirety? I can't

old draft." He was being harsh. *A Table for Fortune* (book one) is the drawing of an arrow. One reads it knowing that affecting events are being set up. It is an introduction to "DAVE," the CIA analyst. (His name is always capped.) Vollmann told me that he believes DAVE to be "well-intentioned." He said he personally believes the Iraq War was wrong, so he has "had to sprinkle extra empathy DAVE's way. I need to be fair and more than fair."

Vollmann also said that the third and fourth volumes of *A Table for Fortune* are "more lyrical" than the first. This second half is reportedly about the wanderings in America of DAVE's homeless son, Matthew. Expect Vollmann's trademark topics – prostitution, drugs, riding freight trains – to feature. This novel is about 9/11, and, obviously, other fallen towers. "Matthew is not Lisa, although I have clothed some of his wretchedness in her sorrows," he writes in volume one's introduction. In short, *A Table for Fortune* is a book about everything Vollmann has previously written. "No matter how much we compartmentalize," Vollmann wrote to me, "deep down we can hardly deny all the things we simultaneously are." He told me he loved Esther, who died in May aged 91.

At the end of his letter, Vollmann told me the working titles of some upcoming projects. "Next books (if I live long enough): THREE DARK STORIES + HOME + LISA, A LOVE STORY. In haste, Bill."

Hey! Ho! Let's go!

How the Ramones redefined punk rock

Christopher Sandford

Is popular music truly an art form? This question has never met a straightforward answer, either from the musicians themselves or the public, and it hangs over the exhibitions currently commemorating the 50th anniversary of punk rock. Among others, there's the *Outsiders, Outcasts, Rebels + Weirdos* show on at the Skirball Center in Los Angeles, while the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland is hosting its own celebration under the name *Hey! Ho! Let's Go! Punk at 50.*

Somehow I'm put in mind of the quote attributed to Jean Cocteau about "Americans being a funny people – first you shock them, then they put you in a museum." Up here in Seattle, the Museum of Pop Culture (MOPOP) has gotten in on the act with its artfully arranged display of smashed guitars and ripped T-shirts to salute both punk and its generational heir, grunge. With all its rollercoaster contortions and polished steel lumps, the MOPOP building itself perhaps offers the strongest argument for a distinctive rock-music art form.

The big-bang name that lies at the heart of these various tributes is that of the sadly defunct New York quartet the Ramones. If you were to distill the Ramones' music into a sentence, you could say that it was very loud, very fast and very simple. They also made a striking visual impact with their pudding-bowl haircuts and group ensemble of torn jeans, leather jackets and shades. None of the original band members – Joey (vocals), Johnny (guitar), Tommy (drums) and Dee Dee (bass) – were related, and none of them were actually called Ramone. They adopted the last name in honor of Paul McCartney, who occasionally used the alias Paul Ramon when his own band was still calling itself the Silver Beetles.

In May 1976, the Ramones released their debut album, *Ramones*. It was a 29-minute song cycle of yelped vocals and buzzsaw guitars that seemed to get ever faster and more furious as it progressed. Titles such as "Blitzkrieg Bop," "Judy Is a Punk" and "Now I Wanna Sniff Some Glue" gave further evidence that the record might be something other than traditional family entertainment. Even so, there was something endearingly old-fashioned about the Ramones' core message. Their devotees saw them less as the shock troops of a cultural revolution than as four good-time boys out for some fun – "a combination of everything we were into: television reruns, drinking beer, getting laid, cheeseburgers, and B-grade movies," as *Punk* magazine's Legs McNeil put it.

Some observers could similarly make out their debut album's classic pop roots. The Ramones were all unashamed fans of early British Invasion bands such as the Dave Clark Five and Herman's Hermits, and at one time had wanted to record their album in the Beatles' home at Abbey Road.

'Punk rock is down to the Ramones. Bands were just playing in a calypso groove until then'

In the end a production budget of just $6,400 didn't allow for any flights to London, although the band did place frequent transatlantic phone calls to the Beatles' producer George Martin to ask for advice. I'm told that Martin was characteristically charming, but that his references to such esoterica as the responsorial backing vocals to the Fab Four's 1965 song "You're Going to Lose That Girl," or the matter of the microtonal key shifts of the band's "Strawberry Fields Forever" may have elicited some head-scratching back in the studio in New York.

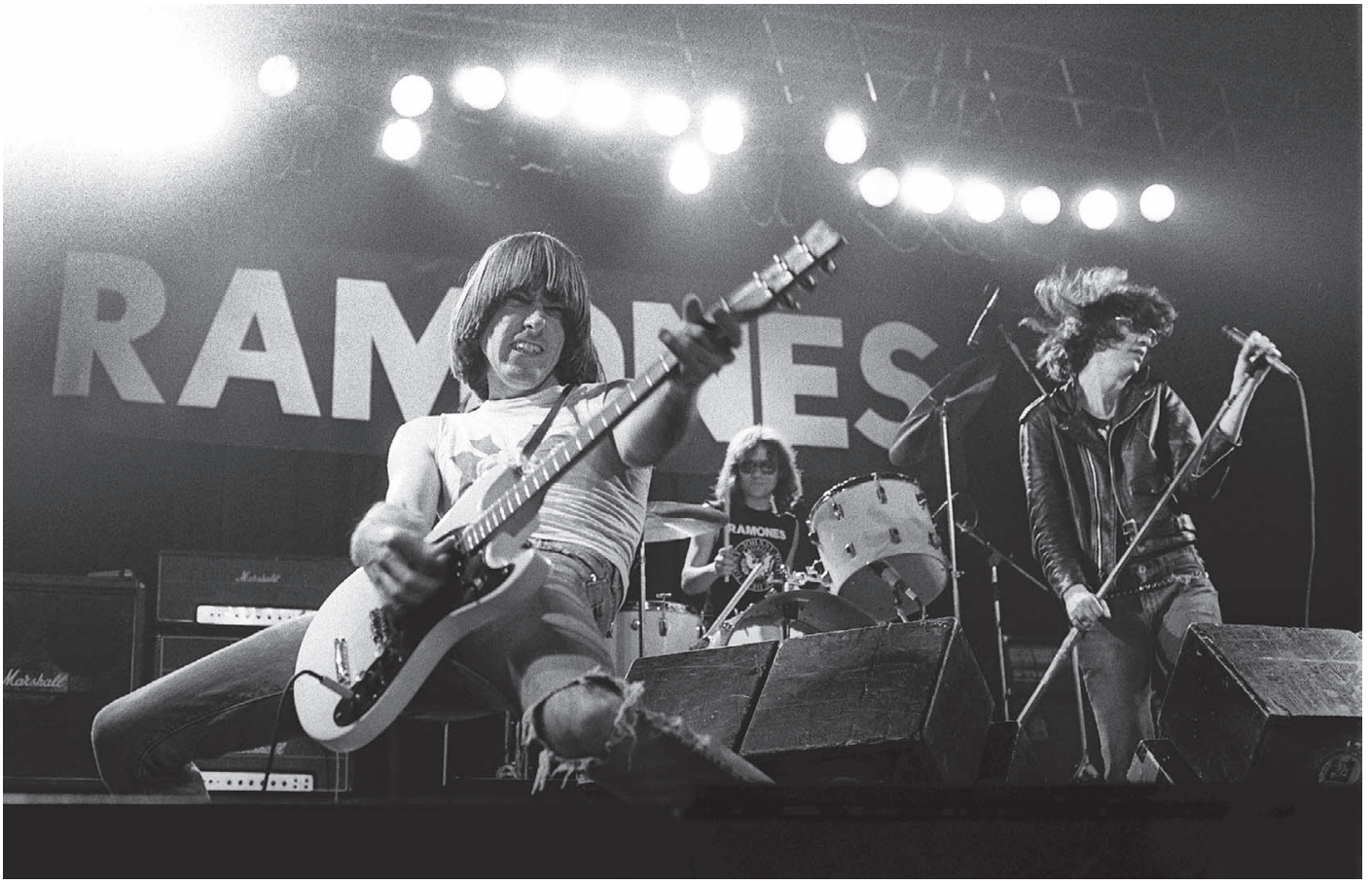
In their private lives, too, at least some of the Ramones were less about a licentious walk on the wild side and more about championing American – and, even more shockingly, capitalist – values. In 1987, Johnny Ramone told me with a straight face that he admired the presidency of Ronald Reagan, whom he called "the greatest man of my lifetime," before revealing that he and his fellow band members had secretly had a five-year plan when starting out. "It was never meant to last," he said. "The idea was to release so many hit records that we could all retire, buy houses and do something else with our lives."

Alas, that didn't happen. The Ramones' debut album sold just 6,000 copies in the US during its first year of release, which was roughly 1,994,000 fewer than *Frampton Comes Alive!* managed in the same period. One critic dismissed the record as "the sound of 10,000 toilets flushing." The band's debut single "Blitzkrieg Bop" similarly avoided major sales on a chart dominated by the likes of the Carpenters, Barry Manilow and the briefly inescapable Bay City Rollers. You could have got long odds in 1976 that the song's introductory chant – "Hey! Ho! Let's go!" – would one day constitute the title of a major exhibition at an American museum.

Despite constant touring, the Ramones were never in danger of filling the world's largest concert arenas. They did, however, attract a fanatically devoted audience, drawn to the short, sharp shock of experiencing the band up close. In general, the Ramones' shows were fast, urgent and thrilling on a gut level, just as all good rock music should be. At a time when certain mainstream groups played three-hour concerts, adorned with fog machines and lasers, the average Ramones show lasted just 35 minutes.

The band's preference for a direct approach to their music, both on stage and record, would later be tested by their collaboration with the famously exacting producer Phil Spector on their fifth album, *End of the Century*. This was a case of two opposite creative schools working together. Johnny Ramone would long remember the time Spector insisted that he perform 87 separate takes of a brief instrumental passage, which, as the guitarist himself genially told me, "was 86 more than I personally was used to."

In a reverse British Invasion, the Ramones became hugely popular across the Atlantic. Their stripped-down approach to their craft provided an early blueprint not only for the likes of the Sex Pistols and the Clash, but even for successor bands such as U2. Bono himself would remember that "everyone's music, including ours, seemed to double in speed" after the Ramones' first album began to change hands. Tony James of the band Generation X adds: "Everybody went up three gears the day they got that album.



HOWARD BARLOW/REDFERNS

The Ramones perform at the Manchester Apollo in December 1977

Punk rock is totally down to the Ramones. Bands were just playing in a calypso groove until then."

Among the Ramones' hardcore fans were the Sex Pistols, a band that still remained a minority interest in 1976. In June that year, the Pistols made two appearances in the assembly room attached to Manchester's Lesser Free Trade Hall. There were probably only 150 customers present for both concerts combined – although they would have needed a rather larger venue to accommodate everyone who later claimed to have been there. The shows represented the birth-cry of the punk rock movement in the UK.

Like the Ramones before them, the Sex Pistols redefined the nature of what constituted an acceptable form of public entertainment. There were generally three or four ad hoc bouncers, sometimes adorned with swastika armbands, at a typical Pistols concert. As the show progressed, the bouncers would shout at people not to climb up and join the band members on stage, while the musicians themselves frequently shouted exactly the opposite: this produced predictably chaotic results. Many of those who remained on the floor contented themselves with pogoing up and down in a series of malign hops, using their point of maximum elevation to spit lustily at the band in what appeared to be a spirit of comradeship and respect, rather than critical reserve. Either way, it was a compelling slice of immersive, mutually confrontational theater.

Anyone who's paid attention to pop music's biggest hits over recent years will have noticed how the game is now played. Today's successful artist will as often as not be only the visible face of a small army of composers, producers and arrangers who work together to furnish the star with the necessary material. This process perhaps reached its apogee with Beyoncé's 2022 hit "Alien Superstar" which credits no fewer than 24 writers. One might reasonably ask if the results of such forms of collaboration have added to pop music's original mission to entertain and uplift with a raw energy that was distinctly its own. I recently sat on the deck of a waterfront Seattle restaurant and, because it was a Monday and quieter than usual inside, I could actually hear the selection of modern pop being played over the PA system. I couldn't differentiate between one song and another, which in itself may be the point of today's hitmaking formula: step forward, Jack Antonoff and friends.

It's rock music at its most primal, with songs reduced to their unadorned essence

Compare that to the Ramones' debut album: 13 self-penned songs and a spirited cover of the 1962 hit "Let's Dance." No assembly line of professional composers-for-hire or studio technicians hunched over their computer keyboards. It's rock music at its most primal, with songs reduced to their unadorned essence: a count-in, a riff, a verse, a chorus. None of them clock in at any longer than two-and-a-half minutes, and most are considerably shorter.

The critics – and to some extent the record-buying public – have taken up the Ramones in recent years, but it has come too late for the four original band members. After a tumultuous 22 years they called it quits in 1996 and, like their music, sadly none of them lingered – at 65, Tommy was the oldest Ramone at the time of his death in July 2014. The band's debut album was certified gold that same summer, 38 years after its original release.

Sushi show

Kaiseki-style menus are taking over fine dining

Clarissa Sebag-Montefiore

J.G. FOX

Four peachy-pink snow crabs lie in a row, waiting to be cooked. They could be dead, were it not for the flickering of an antenna or the occasional terrified roving of a beady eye.

Tonight, the crabs, which have been sourced from Fukui, Japan, and are prized for their sweetness and silky texture, will be ceremoniously shown to diners at Muku, a Michelin-starred restaurant in New York. They will then be split in half (still alive – fresh is best!) and cooked on a handsome hibachi-style ceramic grill. The crabs are one course in the fancy and formal *kaiseki*-inspired menus taking America's coastal cities by storm.

"We want to show the seasonality, not by [just] showing the crab, but actually grilling the crab in front of you," executive chef Manabu Asanuma tells me, gesturing to the creatures that lie trussed up on the table between us at his restaurant. To put it another way, as Asanuma says with a grin, "the customer is watching our show!"

In America, Japanese cuisine has long meant sushi, sushi and more sushi. And go to any sushi restaurant (from the priciest to the cheapest) and most will now offer an *omakase* menu. The concept – which means "I'll leave it to [the chef]," but in the US has become synonymous with a procession of one-bite nigiri and sashimi – has become so commonplace and has lost so many standards in the process that it's often little more than a marketing gimmick. Omakase, as Muku's co-owner Rahul Saito explains, is oversaturated. "People have had enough… [they] are ready for a little bit more."

Now, among the most rarefied Japanese restaurants, a new concept is attracting discerning diners: *kaiseki*, the ultra-refined, ultra-expensive, ultra-ritualistic meal of multiple courses that originally hails from Kyoto. Proponents in New York include the Waldorf Astoria's Yoshoku; Yamada in Chinatown; and now Muku, which opened last September only to earn a Michelin star two months later – the fastest such achievement in the city's history. In Los Angeles, n/naka provides a California take on *kaiseki* – for $395 per person. "We invite you to pause, savor and connect with the true grace of a moment," the restaurant preaches.

Kaiseki is deeply ceremonial, with a set structure and a long history

Part of the appeal – unsurprisingly – lies in these restaurants' exclusivity. Muku has just ten seats. At the equally intimate Yamada ($330 a head) guests are asked not to wear shorts or caps. Yoshoku marries the storied Park Terrace in the Waldorf Astoria (diners eat while eyeing Louis Rigal's 1939 Art Deco "Wheel of Life" mosaic) with a six-course menu that oozes luxury.

Beauty, too, is paramount – as is skill. "What fish are you going to grill? How are you going to grill it to get the most flavor? And how are you going to present it to make it look pretty?" asks Asanuma.

Presenting a *kaiseki* meal isn't a physical endeavor, it's a philosophical one. Take the concept of serving three rice dishes in *cha-kaiseki*, the type of *kaiseki* eaten before ceremonial tea. While the first dish is designed to warm and prepare the stomach, the final steamed rice, served with miso soup and pickles, symbolizes a return to simplicity.

Kaiseki is deeply ceremonial, with a set structure and a long history. In an increasingly online world, it offers ritual, seasonal ingredients and, importantly, an abundance of rules: something the overly connected among us, eager for meditation and formality, crave. It's become a signifier of status and, mirroring wellness trends, a retreat.

"*Kaiseki* is equal parts art form and cuisine. It is also confusing and full of ironies," observes the Palate Project blog. It's "the peak of fine dining, yet its origins lie in the

Buddhist concept of self-restraint. [It] values the simplicity of natural ingredients, and yet it can also be a lavish, multisensory experience with painstaking attention to visual detail."

In Japan, that might mean something as straightforward as a raw bamboo shoot, peeled and sliced in front of you, then placed in a clear dashi soup. That just wouldn't fly in a city as polluted as New York. "That bamboo shoot is picked on a [local Japanese] mountain with clear water and eaten fresh – but that's just not practical here," says Saito.

The answer for Muku is to insist they serve their food *kaiseki* "style," not as a traditional *kaiseki*. Take the foie gras – decidedly not a Japanese ingredient – poached in bonito dashi and blended with egg to create a custard-like texture. The result is a gelatinous dish that is creamy yet complex, rich yet restrained, with the umami of the dashi working hard to tone down the unctuous, fatty foie gras.

Instead of steaming its rice, Muku serves it softer and wetter, inspired by Italian risotto – all the better to absorb the broth. Soba noodles also make an entrance, enhanced by the

'It's the peak of fine dining, yet its origins lie in the Buddhist concept of self-restraint'

owners' roots: the nutty, flavorsome buckwheat hails from Asanuma's parents' farm in Yamagata Prefecture. Each morning, Asanuma hand-makes the noodles himself.

Rules – and breaking them – are things that chef Hirohisa Hayashi understands well. Hayashi grew up in Echizen, outside Kyoto, where his parents ran a *kaiseki* restaurant, which dated back to his great-grandfather. He studied the art of *kaiseki* at a traditional *ryotei*, or classical fine-dining establishment, in Kyoto – and hated it.

"It was very strict," he says, clasping his hands together and frowning. "There are many rules. You have to do this. You cannot do this." One example: sashimi must always be served in odd numbers (even numbers are inauspicious). Another: the stem of leafy greens must be placed to the right of the plate, with the tip of the leaf to the left.

In 2013, Hayashi opened Hirohisa in Soho, serving an unadulterated *kaiseki* menu – and found the locals were utterly confused (most asked why he didn't serve sushi). He has since moderated. There are still Kyoto dishes such as *kaburamushi* (grated turnip steamed with fish). But he also plates scallop *karasumi* layered with flakes of black truffle.

And why not? "At the end of the day, we want people to love it, enjoy it, experience it, feel it – and use the five senses to have fun with it," says Asanuma. He clasps his hands together in prayer, looks up – and smiles. "Just because it is Japanese, you don't need to be in a temple."

Pit stop

Robert F. Moss

Oh my word. Will August never end? February is the shortest month and August is by far the longest, a full 17 days longer than any other. At least it feels that way.

Nothing happens in August. The month has no holidays, since there's nothing to celebrate. The business world grinds to a halt amid last-chance beach vacations and general summertime torpor. Emails go unanswered. Meetings are canceled for lack of attendees. Those who do make it into the office arrive late and duck out early, since no one's around to notice.

It's not just in offices, either. Civic groups and charitable organizations avoid staging events during this cruelest of months, knowing attendance will be poor. Even the world of barbecue largely comes to a standstill.

For those of us who visit barbecue joints professionally, August can be tricky. Once July 4 has passed and the dog days have descended, plenty of mom-and-pop operations close for an entire week or more to let Mom and Pop take a vacation. It's not just family-run spots, either. Each year in August, the acclaimed Franklin Barbecue in Austin shuts down for a full ten days, while many others take similar "smoke breaks."

You're unlikely to find sustenance at a backyard barbecue, either. Your friends with younger children are busy roaming store aisles, checking off lists of school supplies and securing lunch-box staples. Those a bit older are packing trunks and preparing to move students back into dorms or apartments. No one has time for grilling burgers, much less slow-cooking pork shoulders.

This time each year I find myself in the grips of the August malaise, becalmed in the horse latitudes with nary a whiff of hickory smoke in the air. Partly it is because of the heat, which I complained about more than enough in last month's column. Did I mention the humidity, though?

Here on the South Carolina coast the temperature consistently hovers just below triple digits, sustained by downpours that roll through each day between 3 and 7 p.m., washing out prime barbecue hours. Each day I find myself checking the calendar, wondering, "How much longer till Labor Day?"

Ah, Labor Day: the semi-official end of summer, when we can hang up our swimsuits and move on with the rest of our lives. For those with school-age children, the end of summer brings a return to structure and daily routine. In the white-collar world, the regular rhythm of workdays and weekends resumes. Clients start returning calls. The replies trickle in for emails sent long ago.

It's funny how the holiday has evolved over the years. Originally, Labor Day was explicitly about labor – organized labor, that is. The first celebrations in the 1880s were staged by unions to extol the strength and *esprit de corps* of workers. Unionized mills and factories closed to give staff a day of rest and they celebrated the occasion with parades and outdoor barbecues. (Yes, barbecue has been part of the holiday since the very beginning.)

Before long, dozens of states had recognized the Labor Day holiday and, in 1894, Congress made it a federal one. In subsequent decades, as more non-union workers had the day off, the parades and radical

For those of us who visit barbecue joints professionally, August can be tricky

trappings fell by the wayside. By World War Two, Labor Day had lost its connection to unionism and become a long weekend of relaxation, while the barbecues had shifted from outdoor pits to backyard grills and restaurants.

In the 1950s and 1960s, newspapers brimmed with ads for grills and meat in the run-up to Labor Day. These days, our social media feeds are crammed with round-ups offering "23 Crowd-Pleasing Labor Day Recipes for the Ultimate Summer Send-Off" and the like.

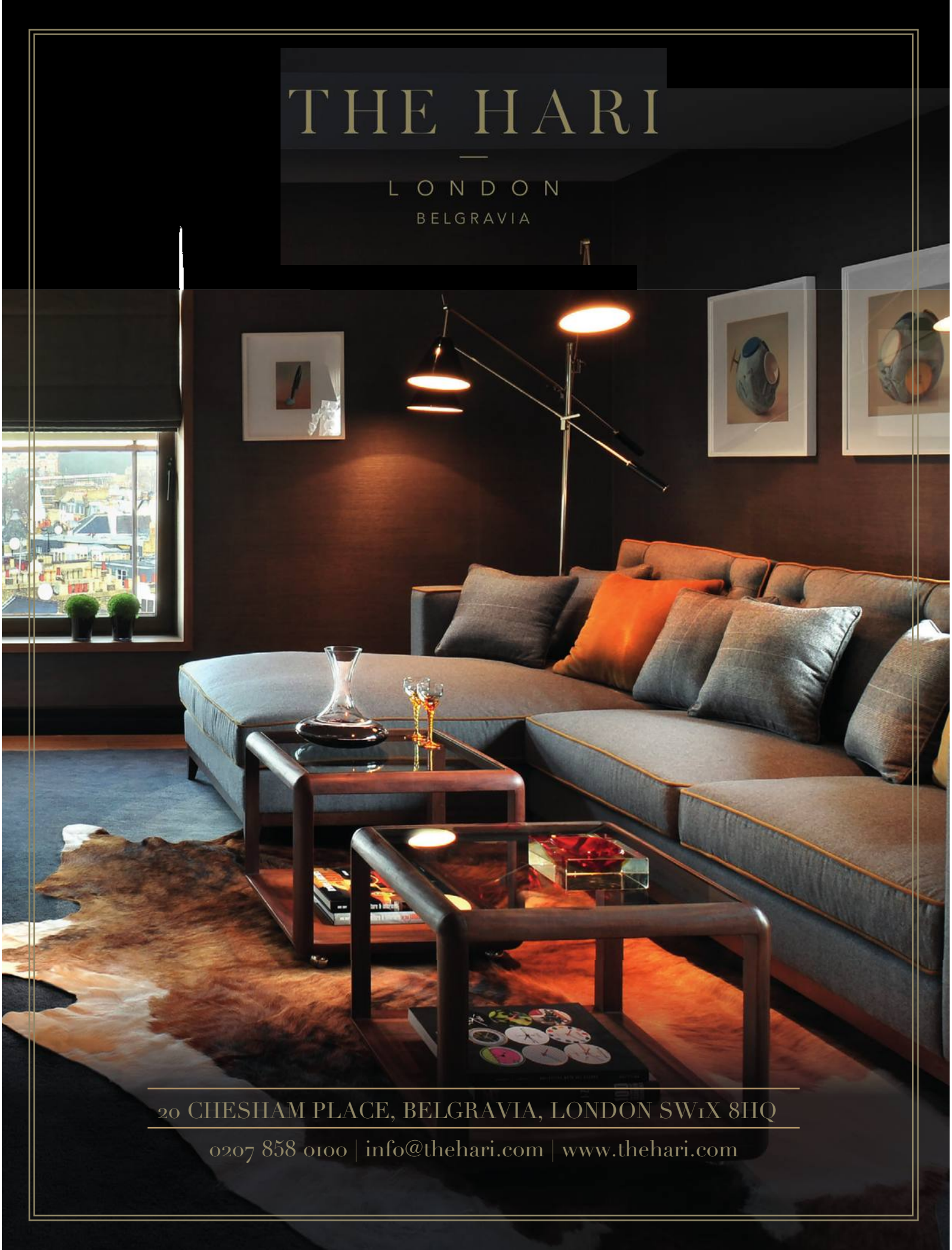
This Labor Day weekend, you certainly won't see any "Closed for Vacation" signs on the doors of barbecue joints. Owners fire up extra pits and ramp up staffing, preparing for the flood of orders on one of their busiest weekends of the year.

These days, the timing of Labor Day seems a bit out of whack. For many, instead of a much-needed respite after a long stretch of work, the holiday is more of a "back to labor day" – one last summer hurrah before old routines resume.

As I'm writing this, I've started thinking of all the friends we haven't seen in weeks, if not months, what with all the hubbub and summer travel. Perhaps we should invite them over for a Labor Day barbecue?

Contemplating it, I can feel a breeze beginning to stir and the sails slowly filling. I envision thick slabs of spare ribs, neatly trimmed, dry-brined with salt and ready for the pit. There will definitely be coleslaw – you have to have slaw with ribs. Maybe a tub of potato salad, too, with a dash of mustard to give it a pale yellow hue.

You know, I'm kind of looking forward to Labor Day now. And to getting back to work.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New York life

Josie Cox

If Donald Trump wants to make Canada the 51st state, I suspect it's for the wrong reasons. I just got back from a family holiday. We started in Vancouver, then drove to Whistler, before flying to Calgary and taking the Trans-Canada Highway – past places with names like Bearspaw and Dead Man's Flats – into the Canadian Rockies and Banff National Park.

I was telling a friend about the trip a few days ago and actually welled up when I was describing the deep azure hue of Lake Louise; the vastness of the forests and the astonishing beauty of the wildlife – from chipmunks to grizzlies – that seems to coexist peacefully with the comparatively tiny human population. It was nature on a scale that made human beings feel refreshingly incidental. The furthest thing you could possibly imagine from Manhattan.

But the less obvious thing that I relished about Canada was the jovial men of a certain age and their tireless appetite for conversation with strangers. Everywhere we went, they seemed to be waiting to chat. No agenda, just a puppyish desire to engage in a verbal volley of interesting pleasantries.

At first there was a globetrotting sociologist whom I encountered while waiting to cross a suspension bridge – a popular tourist attraction – at the height of the season. He was standing in front of me in the sluggishly moving line. All it took to catalyze conversation was a split second of direct eye contact. "Hello," he said, beaming. And the conversation had begun.

Only Canada has an abundant supply of semi-retired men with hiking boots and opinions on freshwater fish

In the ensuing 30 minutes we discussed world politics, jazz music, parenting and traumatic brain injuries. Time flew. I introduced him to my in-laws, my daughter, my husband – and I met his clan too. He later tracked down my email address, in a way that somehow felt entirely Canadian rather than remotely alarming, and sent me some travel tips for the remainder of our trip.

A few days later, I was out hiking with my sister-in-law and our children when a lanky-limbed man who could've passed for a Boy Scout leader overtook us and then immediately looked over his shoulder with the nonchalance of someone preparing to explain where to find the nearest public toilet. "The crow met me as I got off the bus just now," he told us, confidence ablaze, face entirely earnest, and not bothering to break his stride. "And thank goodness it did," he elaborated before we could respond. "It offers me divine protection against the bears."

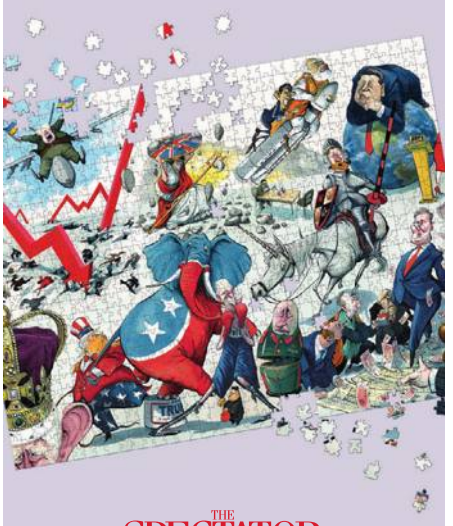
That one was, admittedly, a shorter conversation, but unparalleled in its good-natured obscurity. There was no hint that he expected us not to believe him. He simply regarded this as critical local knowledge and it was his solemn – nay, god-given! – duty to convey it widely and enthusiastically.

There were others: a waiter from Manitoba with unexpectedly forceful opinions about freshwater fish; a Québec sommelier who mounted an impassioned defense of natural wine; cashiers, park wardens and fellow hikers who all seemed happy to drift into conversation without any obvious purpose beyond the pleasure of it.

Don't get me wrong, I've made my fair share of spontaneous acquaintances in New York City, but here, these types of interactions often carry an edge – a sales pitch, a complaint, a performance, or just some of the city's exhausting nervous energy. Canada's version felt different. People simply seemed to assume that a stranger might be worth talking to for no other reason than that they might have something unexpectedly interesting to say. And generally the conversations weren't one-sided in the way they so often can be in New York. Questions were asked. Unfashionable though it may be, answers were actually listened to. The crow guy was an exception. In fairness, though, he wasn't really looking for conversation so much as disseminating crucial health and safety advice.

We spend so much of modern life trying to optimize every minute and curate every interaction that talking without an agenda can feel a bit quaint. But there's something so civilized about it. You emerge knowing a little more about the world than you did ten minutes earlier – about jazz or brain injuries, or indeed about the cosmic protections that the crow could offer you against the mighty bear – having expected nothing more than to stand in a line or cajole your kids to hike the last mile uphill without moaning.

Trump may think Canada's greatest assets are its minerals and water. He's wrong: many countries have natural resources, but only Canada has an abundant supply of semi-retired men with hiking boots, opinions about freshwater fish and 30 minutes to spare for a natter. What a gift to a tourist from New York City who's constitutionally incapable of minding her own business.



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Havana life

Ruaridh Nicoll

I have a sideline in travel writing, so am lucky enough to have seen some very lovely beaches. Few are as spectacular as Cuba's Varadero. There are others I prefer – Cossies in the Cocos (Keeling), if you happen to be passing, or the hidden beach at Achmelvich in Scotland, where I shivered between granite walls in my childhood summers.

But if classic sun, sea and sand is your thing, Varadero's 12-mile, palm-fringed spit is unbeatable. It took me years of living in Cuba to visit. I believed that Varadero was all about package tourism – socialist package tourism. Then I went and walked those infinite sands at dawn, the water as clear and intoxicating as absinthe, and got over myself.

Now my family and I have moved here for a month. I can't leave Cuba – Donald Trump has said we're next on the list for regime change and as a reporter it would be bad form to miss it. But life in Havana, six months into the US fuel blockade, was grueling. Water, electricity and gas disappeared at random, sometimes for days at a

time, and the blackouts deprived us of sleep. For my Cuban neighbors, life was far worse. So there's a certain guilt to decamping to the beach but I justify the move by telling myself the Marines might choose this one for an invasion. Such ballsiness doesn't appear to impress the mural of Che Guevara I now pass everyday – it is so badly painted he resembles the eye-roll emoji.

Varadero pokes out from the top of Cuba, and has a small town at its southern end. In August, it's usually packed with my fellow Habaneros, reverberating to *reguetón* and salsa. Cubans like to spend summer chest deep in the water, drinking beer and laughing. But the crisis has put paid to that. It was shockingly easy to rent a house here for a month – one with a lovely terrace where my four-year-old boy likes to hang out, gossiping with passersby.

As a foreigner I used to be scalped by the taxi drivers with their old 1950s Chevys and Dodges. But with no gas, electric Chinese tuk-tuks have taken over, charging a flat 10c a trip. If we're not hurrying, Angel will pick us up in his pony and trap and we'll ride in style. Maybe to Amauri, a fisherman who filets fresh red snapper that feeds us for three days (soup from its head, fried fish, lastly a risotto). Tito turns up with avocados; Gabriel has a stall selling *guarapo* – sugarcane juice – while on the beach; Javier sells mamoncillos, a relative of the lychee that my son (and my wife) eat as they while away hours by the water.

My family sits in the eye of this geopolitical hurricane and finds the calm a passing paradise

I haven't seen a single non-Cuban tourist. Pressure from Washington has caused all the package holiday airlines to pull out, laying waste to the country's economy.

There are visitors though. In the evenings, families from the nearby towns of Cárdenas and Santa Marta arrive, the new tuks-tuks making the journey affordable. My son befriends their kids in the surf, while the parents tell us of the hardships they face – and the relief the beach brings.

Whatever happens, I suspect it will again become unaffordable for them. If Washington fails to fell the Cuban system, Varadero will return to being a tourist cash-cow for the communist government. If the US succeeds, a very different future beckons, given Miami is only a 45-minute flight away.

I stand in the water and look at the palm-fringed beach edge, with its low-slung houses, some of which are made of beautiful coral brick. Varadero would turn from a worn, out-of-time village with terrible restaurants into a Miami Beach-style strip with alternatively awful, if infinitely more expensive, restaurants.

For the moment though, my family sits in the eye of this geopolitical hurricane and finds the calm a passing paradise. "We will look back on this as an idyll," says my father-in-law, who has joined us. Only our sleep remains unsettled, disturbed by anxious dreams of what must come.

Local life

Bill Kauffman

Those sending their saliva to ancestry.com and 23andMe might want to heed the advice Dr. Zaius gives to Charlton Heston as the stranded astronaut sets off to stumble upon his destiny in *Planet of the Apes*: "Don't look for it, Taylor. You may not like what you find."

Exhibit A: our friend Peter, descendant along the Quincy line in Massachusetts – you know, the folks who more or less invented New England. Peter took an early iteration of one of those DNA tests and was told, to his astonishment, that he was – according to Science! – significantly Norwegian.

Muttering the Yankee equivalent of "WTF," Peter threw himself into a full-bore exploration of this putative heritage. As we live about 30 miles southwest of the first Norwegian settlement in America, he requested a tour of his new mecca: Kendall, New York. We warned him that the Norwegian influence on and presence in rural western New York is somewhere between negligible and invisible, but images of the homeland he'd never seen clouded his mind.

So we drove Peter down Norway Road and told him the story of the Sloopers: the first Norwegian settlers in America, 52 hardy souls who in 1825 traveled along the Erie Canal before disembarking in Holley and hiking the ten miles to Kendall. (A 53rd Slooper, Lars Larson Geilane, stayed behind in New York City to sell the sloop and then skated 290 miles along the frozen canal.) I thought I detected a tear escaping Peter's eye as he read the weathered historic marker dedicated to the Sloopers in front of Kendall High School.

Further testing of Peter's spit or blood or whatever watery fluids he produced revealed him to be a Quincy with nary a trace of Scandinavia coursing through his veins, but who wouldn't like to be Norwegian for a day?

Exhibit B: my father-in-law, proudly Armenian, who after his boyhood in the diaspora community in Syria became an American citizen of Glendale, California, wherein resides the largest concentration of Armenians this side of Yerevan. My father-in-law, too, took a test, and it threw him for a triple loop: rather than affirming him as 100 percent Armenian, it asserted a prominent Basque strain in his makeup.

This seemed preposterous – and subsequent testing of his offspring has revealed their progenitor to have been fully Armenian. But that didn't stop my wife and daughter from pursuing their parallel version of the ethnic fakery currently on display by the "Pretendians"– those mostly female claimants of a specious Amerindian heritage, *à la* Senator Elizabeth Warren and folk singer Buffy Sainte-Marie. I told wife and daughter that they were engaged in a Basquerade. But they rather enjoyed the cultural appropriation, and I did too.

As it happens, we three were in Boise, Idaho, while the Basque charade was going strong. Boise has the largest Basque population in America. There's even a Basque block, complete with museum, market and a bar at which we ate croquetas and toasted those noble sheepherding people.

My newly Basque loved ones purchased bumper stickers boasting of their half-Basqueness and quarter-Basqueness while I searched in vain for a refrigerator magnet bearing an exclamation-point-studded logo of a Basque separatist group. *Euskadi Askatuta*, baby!

The Basquerade was fun while it lasted, but let's face it: the Armenians have much better food. After rolling these balls of confusion I figured that I may as well spit on a piece of paper and send it off to the DNA boys. Alas, my report – or series of reports, as these were refined several times – revealed no hitherto unknown exoticisms, though an early version did credit me with being 1 percent Eastern European, which led a family member to delightedly dub me the Polack. I considered, but rejected, the opportunity to try duck blood soup.

Germany and Italy were the other ingredients in my ethnic stew, but I forbore any Axis celebration

Turns out that my mongrel heritage is plurality Irish, which I'd suspected. A genealogy-digging relative placed most of our Mick forebears as Catholics in Northern Ireland (Fermanagh), so I scared up a 1981 hunger-strike poster and taped it to my office wall. Given that Englishness ran a fairly close second in my bloodline, I figured that in all fairness I ought at least to down a compensatory black and tan. Germany and Italy were the other prominent ingredients in my ethnic stew, but I forbore any Axis celebration.

Our daughter and son-in-law recently had their dog Scooter's slobber subjected to a canine DNA test administered by the cleverly titled company Embark. At last report Scooter was content being a mutt, as we all ought to be.

BEST OF BRITISH

FROM THE LONDON OFFICE

Tim Shipman
uncovers the constant feuding at the heart of Reform

Quentin Letts
thinks we should enjoy Anglican priests while we can

Arabella Byrne
explains how she got 'Old Money Face'

Mary Wakefield
issues a warning about 'Big Surrogacy'

Peter Hitchens
says we must stop with the totalitarian name-calling

FINE ART IMAGES/HERITAGE IMAGES VIA GETTY IMAGES

'Dog-hate entered my soul. It festers there still. But people dislike people who dislike dogs so I keep it hidden
Lloyd Evans – p62

Right mess

The feuding at the heart of Reform

TIM SHIPMAN

If Tolstoy had written about British politics, he might have noted: "Happy parties are all alike; every unhappy party is unhappy in its own way." Reform UK is beginning to resemble a laboratory test for the idea that every party run by Nigel Farage is unhappy in the same way. Just as in UKIP and the Brexit party, a highly dominant leader exists at the center of a court, with extreme tensions between loyalist long-marchers and arrivistes, between insurgency and respectability, between campaigning and preparing for government.

A new round of bloodletting erupted on August 17, when the founder of ConservativeHome, Tim Montgomerie, who defected to Reform two years ago, was suspended following public criticism of Farage and the party's home affairs spokesman Zia Yusuf. This decision came between the recording and broadcast of an interview Montgomerie gave to *The Spectator* expressing his concern about tone, tactical voting and party structures.

Montgomerie was stating what many say in private. But for those at the top of the party, the most significant thing to happen was not the Montgomerie affair. "For the first time since Easter, we held a press conference and no one asked about Nigel's finances or the £5 million," says one Reform source, referring to the simmering row about Farage's acceptance of a £5 million "gift" from the crypto-billionaire Christopher Harborne and donations from his close associate "Posh George" Cottrell.

Instead, for the first time in months, the lead item on the main TV news bulletins was a Reform policy announcement – from Robert Jenrick and Richard Tice – to slash welfare spending by £50 billion by barring foreign nationals from claiming almost all benefits, restricting disability payments to the most afflicted and reinstituting the two-child benefit cap.

Farage was away on August 17, and did not know that Tom Waterhouse, the general secretary, and Lee Anderson, the party chairman, were going to suspend Montgomerie. But it was Farage, in the spring, who had ordered a benefits-cuts plan be drawn up, following taunts from the Tories that he was "soft on welfare" because his party's voters live in places where it is rife.

This, Reform staffers say, is missing the point. "Yes, Reform constituencies have very high numbers of people who are claiming, but our voters aren't those people," says one. "They're those people's neighbors."

A recent Reform focus group with Labour voters in the northwest who are considering switching to Reform found outspoken backing for welfare cuts. Polling shows that 65 percent of all voters (and three out of four Reform voters) think people should have to work for their benefits after six months.

The infighting, the rows and the questions about the court structure are all off-putting to serious people

Once Farage resigned his seat to fight a by-election in Clacton, he envisaged the welfare plan as part of a "one-two punch," alongside the by-election victory, to "get back to a situation in which we are the master, not the follower, of the news."

Further policy offerings will follow. Suella Braverman, the shadow education spokeswoman, will outline plans for apprenticeships, designed to improve the skills of the British population. Tice will set out plans for housing reform. Both are designed to signal that Reform's people are Britons who work, rather than migrants who don't. "People will be left with no sense of subtlety as to who Reform is trying to help," says one insider. "We are unambiguously a party of workers."

The welfare policy has stolen a march on the Tories. Helen Whately, the shadow work and pensions secretary, announced a policy review last year, but it has not delivered. The Tory offering risks looking like a Reform retread. Irate members of the shadow cabinet, who think Whately has dropped the ball, have dubbed her "Helen Lately." A source familiar with the process says: "Both the Tories and Reform wanted to find some money from benefits which they could then spend at party conference. Helen has, in essence, spent the last year with her thumb up her arse." There is an expectation inside Reform that the Tories will use the cash to announce that they would scrap inheritance tax.

Reform's conference, in Birmingham, comes first, beginning on September 3. The original slogan, "It's Time For Reform," has been scrapped. "The focus is all on the first hundred days" of a Reform government, one source explains. "Nigel believes there will be an election sooner rather than later, very likely in 2027," a party source says.

Reform high command remains bullish about its electoral prospects. "Nigel could get run over by a bus and we'll walk away with 125 seats at the next election," another senior figure says. Candidates in target seats are divided into "three tranches of 125." The source explains: "125 is the basement, 250 is the median expectation, 375 is the target." The last would represent a Reform majority of 100. Candidates for the first batch of highly winnable seats will be selected and announced "pretty darn soon." Another staffer says: "There are some very serious people." Farage also plans to unveil "two or three" new members of his "shadow cabinet." He continues to woo business leaders, former military men and ex-NHS administrators to join up and lend an air of professional expertise to the party's spokespeople.

But this is where the Montgomerie affair and the criticism he has leveled are a problem. The infighting, the rows and the questions about the court structure of Team Farage are all off-putting to serious people, most of whom would have to take a huge pay cut to sign up. They would also only do so if there were a serious prospect of Reform

forming a government. Both Farage's funding issues and Yusuf's brutal approach to people (branding Ben Wallace a "traitor") and policies (his tougher-than-Trump desire to deport every single illegal migrant) appear to fuel tactical voting against Reform.

Yusuf is probably the most divisive figure at the top of British politics. A highly successful ex-businessman, who sold his company for £250 million, he seems fired by rage at the state of the world and the Conservatives in particular. As party chairman, he was responsible for helping Reform expand from a start-up into the most professional operation Farage has led. "Nigel is in frank admiration for what Zia can do," says a party official. "All the things that normally go wrong with a business-background politician, he has managed to avoid. He has never put his foot in it in a broadcast interview – not accidentally, anyway." Montgomerie agrees: "He made the party organization work. He has so many qualities, but he has to be a team player."

Yusuf also seems compelled to feud with enemies, external and (wearingly) internal. "Zia did not talk to me for three months when he found out I was involved in bringing Jenrick over," says Montgomerie. "You cannot behave like a child in politics."

Montgomerie is not alone. "At any given point, the list of people that Zia is not speaking to tends to be longer than the list of those to whom he is," says another insider. "And if you do have the misfortune to be on the list of

'The list of people Zia is not speaking to tends to be longer than the list of those to whom he is'

those he is speaking to, you can rest assured that you'll soon be back on the banned list." In an extraordinary measure of the intense feelings Yusuf generates, a Reform insider says: "Zia is an omni-c***. It's not personal. He's just like it to everyone."

Critics point out that by attacking Rupert Lowe and reporting him to the police (a process which resulted in Lowe's guns being confiscated), Yusuf effectively drove Lowe to set up his own party, which is now leaching votes from Reform. "Zia's original sin was that he created Restore by handling Rupert the way he did," says one internal critic. "They are now at 4 percent, every one of those percentage points having come from Reform's vote."

Yusuf's critics think his abrasive style has repelled Reform-curious voters. Montgomerie says: "Zia is completely uninterested, it seems to me, in unwinding Reform's number one problem, which I think is tactical voting against us – I think he reinforces that." A second Reformer adds: "There's no way around it. Zia doesn't play well with women." Montgomerie has a theory. "If you understand him as… he wants to succeed Nigel Farage, almost everything he does makes sense. The loyalty to Nigel, the freelancing, the indifference to the wider electorate… If we don't look like decent people, even people who agree with us on deportation won't trust us with those policies. You have to pass a basic decency threshold to unwind that tactical voting."

The fear of some is that Farage also appears too angry. "He's not the Nigel I used to know," says one of his former drinking partners. Asked how much internal discussion there was about how to handle questions about Farage's finances, one source says: "Zero." The result was a series of confrontational exchanges. Montgomerie says: "Nigel is probably one of the best media performers of the last two decades. What he cannot do is, if it's about him, his personal circumstances or his personal finances, particularly if he's interviewed by a woman – he's not good. When he is facing hostile questioning, he doesn't perform well."

Farage loyalists think they can bypass the mainstream media. But as with Donald Trump, there is a tension between running an insurgency and shackling Farage's campaigning genius to a more structured organization. "He doesn't have a chief of staff," says Montgomerie. "He doesn't have regular meetings with his MPs. There isn't someone at shadow cabinet level in charge of selecting candidates."

Montgomerie also complains that "our ground operation is not what it should be" and gave Farage the wrong steer on recent by-election results. "We were going to win Runcorn handsomely. We won by six votes. They thought they were close on the night of Makerfield. So the intelligence was wrong."

He is also critical of the polling, calling it "thinner" than that of the Tories. "It's not asking the awkward questions. It's not understanding the nature of our women problem, or how you address tactical voting." This is a view that is less widely shared – Farage's numbers man, Chris Bruni-Lowe, is a highly regarded message-writer and is in demand from political parties around the world.

The age-old criticism of Farage is that he values loyalty above ability. "There are people around him who have been around him for quite a long time who, if there were a competitive tendering process, I'm not sure would survive," says Montgomerie.

Reform's answer is that Montgomerie held no party position and does not see a lot of what goes on in headquarters. "It's a very professional operation," says one staffer. "The shadow cabinet is a very cohesive unit. Everyone's shoulder is to the wheel." They insist that the upcoming announcements will put a difficult summer behind them.

Reform is also back on top in the polls and Montgomerie says he will fight his suspension. "If Reform gets it right, the sky is the limit," he says. "But we're not getting it as right as I think we need to yet."

It turns out Tolstoy touched on the challenge ahead for Farage, in his appropriately titled "Three Methods of Reform": "Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself."

Crossing Millennium Bridge

After William Wordsworth

Some way across the bridge I stop to watch
a pigeon on the parapet: the hideous,
urban beauty of the bird, its thrust-hold strut,
the wings flexed, garment-like, about it,
wearing the defiant grit and glitter of the city.
It lifts off into the smokeless air: the buses, Gherkin,
Shard, the Tate, tenement blocks, the domes,
and on the bank a Liebherr crane hand on hip
conducts the barges gliding on the river, calm,
like a Calder mobile I once saw, the gallery wall steeped
in its shadows. I get a glimpse through the sharp,
discordant light of a metallic heart: the stacking up
of time, dear passer-by, is impervious
to the pulse of a single life, hushed in vertigo.

– Astrid Alben

THE SPECTATOR'S NOTES

Charles Moore

If poor Jason Arday killed himself, it will be necessary to work out why. To do so, it will help to know why he resigned his professorship. It seems highly unlikely he resigned if Cambridge University did not want him to. It had defended him in public throughout, after all. Yet if he had been confident of Cambridge's continuing support, why did he sacrifice the benefit of its protection? If Cambridge suggested to him that its protection would, for whatever reason, shortly cease, what caused its change of mind? What a terrible shock for him if the institution which had raised him so high was now ready to cast him out. Is the institutional attack on the press over this matter a deflection from the truth?

Professor Hilary Cremin is head of the Faculty of Education which bestowed on Arday the chair from which he eventually resigned. She recently published a book called *Rewilding Education* which "calls for a new educational model for a new kind of future – one shaped by the climate crisis, downward mobility, Generative AI and post-truth politics." Looking at the Cambridge situation, I would sorrowfully say her dream is coming true.

Everyone is "rewilding" everything. The National Trust has taken it as an excuse to cut back on gardening and stop mowing the lawn. Councils let verges grow full of litter. The Rewild the Church movement seeks to impoverish clergy earnings further by ceasing to cultivate 30 percent of church land. "Rewilding" now stretches way beyond its original link with nature. There is a book called *Rewilding the Corporate Mind*; there is rewilding general practice, rewilding finance, rewilding law and even talk of rewilding brain surgery. Linked is the current use of the word "wild," given a new magic, like that which "organic" attained 25 years ago. Sometimes there is a real meaning to what is wild – the difference, for example, between wild and domestic animals or wild and garden strawberries. But often it currently means occupying places which belong to somebody else and not paying for them – as in "wild swimming" and "wild camping." In theory and practice, that is highly antisocial. "Born to be mild"

would be a much kindlier aspiration for the human race.

For more than 20 years until 2025, Mark Easton was home editor for BBC News. Most correspondents like to big up their subject, but he has made it his mission to say crime is going down, presenting entire programs about this. The first episode of his latest, *The Great Crime Mystery*, appeared on Radio 4 last week. There have indeed been reductions in violent and property crime, chiefly caused by better surveillance technology and the internet's ability to trace objects and people. When I returned to living in the country 30 years ago, there was serious antique theft from large houses. This has now collapsed because antiques are too easily identified online and much less valuable than in the 1990s. But I notice Easton refers not only to violent and property crime; he also states that crime in general is falling. His sources are police statistics and the National Crime Survey, based on interviews about individuals' experience of crime. Do these capture modern reasons for not reporting crime? One will be that some crimes, notably drug-taking, are scarcely seen as crimes at all, because the police show no interest. Similarly, people suffer would-be scams online every day of their lives but I doubt they notice much unless successfully cheated. There is also a vast increase in road crimes committed by bikes and e-scooters. If you stand by the traffic lights of a main intersection in London for a few minutes you will always (yes, always) see such bikes breaking the law every minute. People notice that such infringements are not policed. Beggars, addicts, cyclists and, in London, constant protesters (usually about the Middle East or green stuff) unchecked by police, make people alienated from their neighborhoods even if such behavior would not normally end up in court. Combine that with the sense that iPhone and computer privacy is compromised, and so bad actors (even foreign regimes) can cheat you, spy on you and steal, sell or abuse your data, and you feel unsafe indoors and out. I hope Easton addresses this in future episodes. At present, his program is a procession of interviews with professors who imply the public is stupid.

I recently received an invitation to address (remotely) a large book club in Missoula, Montana, to discuss one of my Thatcher volumes. The email was so polite as to be suspect, but I attributed that to the natural courtesy of Americans. I wanted to accept because our dear daughter-in-law has family connections with Missoula, and I once had a delightful visit there. I replied, expressing interest. The courteous follow-up added that, "Because every Author Showcase is individually planned and moderated, we do request a moderation and logistics contribution." I had never previously been asked to pay to talk about my books. I wrote back: "I assume that means money! How much?" The answer, sugared with more flattery, was $272. I was contemplating whether my fondness for Missoula would persuade me to cough up when I received an invitation from another book club, this time in Singapore. The wording was spookily similar, and again, amid much buttering of my paws, contained a request, on the second email, for "a small support contribution associated with the feature." My ensuing "How much?" question elicited: "in the range of $150-$300." I wrote to Singapore to say I had received a comparable invitation from another book club in another country. It answered: "We have also been made aware that there are other book clubs using similar approaches and language, which is precisely why I understand your caution." All the same, I refused Singapore and have left poor Missoula unanswered. I apologize to both if their use of AI has made me unduly suspicious. Have other authors received such things?

Plastic parsons

Enjoy Anglican priests while you still can

QUENTIN LETTS

Something amazing happened as I was walking my 91-year-old mother through Ledbury: we saw a bobby on the beat. He was even in a helmet, not a baseball cap. "A real policeman!" squealed various people, reacting as they might to a steam train or an Austin-Healey, reminders of more distinctive days.

The same surprise may soon be evident when we see dog collars. A new scheme, oversight ministry, adopted by some Church of England dioceses, is taking vicars off the streets. Instead of being front-line clergy they will become "oversight ministers" and "area deans," managers of lay, unpaid "focal ministers." These focal ministers will take services, undertake pastoral visits and, as the promotional blurb puts it, "be present in the wider community as an available point of contact for anyone connecting with the church community." David Blunkett gave us plastic Plod community support officers; the C of E is giving us plastic parsons.

Oversight ministry has reached Truro, Leicester, Sheffield, Birmingham and Lincoln and is coming to our patch, Hereford. Our bishop is graciously saying that he will allow vicars to opt out of the scheme. Let's see. Bureaucrats are quietly applying pressure on priests. Muscular Christianity has been replaced by acidic office politics.

Focal ministers will not spend years at theological college. They will, however, be drilled in the things that modern Church officials revere. They "will be required to complete Safeguarding training to Leadership level as well as Raising Awareness of Domestic Abuse." Church documents once reserved initial capital letters for God Almighty. Now they are given to Safeguarding and Domestic Abuse.

Readers will know that the C of E is in a pickle. Pews empty while race advisors, environmentalists and Safeguarding experts are marching as to war, spouting passive-aggressive managerialism and citing charity law as they hassle the few weekly worshippers. These bureaucrats benefit from a fund Queen Anne founded in 1704 to help poor parishes. In 1948 that bounty was merged into the Church Commissioners. Today, according to the Save the Parish ginger group, only £85 million of the fund's annual £653 million income goes to parishes. Rural churches are pitifully impoverished and several cathedrals are in deficit, some near bankruptcy. Vicars are resigning in even greater numbers than those who are retiring, a third showing symptoms of depression. Working for today's corporatized Church is plainly not much fun. Yet the Archbishop of Canterbury smiles brightly and talks of splurging £100 million on what the C of E insists on calling "reparatory justice."

Cultural self-hatred, which has included the abandonment of old texts and the sale of spacious rectories, has been evident for decades. The consequences, accelerated by the closure of churches during lockdown, are now impossible to ignore. The Church has often countered calls for disestablishment by saying it had a priest in every pulpit. This argument is used when politicians suggest bishops should be ejected from the House of Lords. "We are close to the people," flute their graces. Once priests are mere "area deans," that line will not wash.

Focal ministers will not spend years at theological college but be drilled in the things Church officials revere

I learned that our diocese was introducing oversight ministry because for a decade I have, some five times a year, taken services as a layman. Yes, the idea of a Westminster journalist rising to his hind legs in the vicar's stall, leading divine worship, sounds satirical. What a posturing pulpiteer! Context might help. The Reformation of the 16th century was, among other things, a revolution against Rome's clerisy. A liberated English Church found itself short of priests. As it took back control it therefore allowed nonsacramental services such as matins and evensong to be led by congregants. They would do so without pay. Canon B11 of Church law states that such persons will be authorized by a bishop or will be "some other suitable lay person." The wardens of our rural parish church (congregation 20, weekly collection £100) kindly asked me to do the honors when the rector was busy at one of her six other churches.

When taking matins you stick strictly to the liturgy – we use the Book of Common Prayer – and must not say the absolution or preach. When it comes to the moment for a sermon I give a short talk on history. Prayers are best said in a formal voice, shorn of personality. I model my delivery on that of my late father, a headmaster who took school services for decades, just as his own father did from the 1920s. For me, and perhaps others, churchgoing is an act of generational continuity. The Hebrew saying is *l'dor v'dor*.

Last week *l'dor v'dor* went kersplatt when I was told I would need to undergo up to 18 months' indoctrination, including "Safeguarding training to Leadership level," if I wished to continue to proclaim Cranmer's matins. Only after that "formation period" might a certificate be issued to permit me to operate. That would mean complying with the Church's secular creeds. And there, perhaps, is the reason oversight ministry is being introduced. The clerisy, still reeling from the departure of their blessed Archbishop Welby in – ha! – a Safeguarding scandal, has spotted a way to make today's Protestants bend to their will. Fusty old sods who lead matins in country churches when the vicar can't make it will not be tolerated. How many congregants will have the time or patience to submit to 18 months of training?

The noble principle of lay readers, established over 500 years of Anglicanism, is being warped by bureaucrats. Oversight ministry will increase their power and simultaneously hinder priests in their vocation.

So enjoy Anglican priests while you still have them. They have been a staple of our literature and lore for centuries. Consider George Herbert, Trollope's Barchester, Jane Austen's Mr. Collins, Woodbine Willie, the Vicar of Dibley or Captain Sam Davies, the padre who led the Glorious Glosters in divine worship before the battle of Imjin in 1951. I met him. What a man.

The dog collar is a reminder both of more distinctive days and of a time when the Church existed in the very weft of Englishness. Now it will be lost to oversight ministry. What an… oversight.

License to kill

When does targeting the enemy become murder?

OWEN MATTHEWS

When is extrajudicial killing just war by other means, and when does it become a state-sponsored act of terror? "We were not terrorists but fighters for freedom who fought with our eyes open," Menachem Begin wrote of Irgun, the irregular group of fighters he led during the 1947-48 civil war in Mandatory Palestine, the tactics of whom included bombings and assassinations. But where does the August 1 bombing of the Balzi Rossi restaurant in central Moscow – which killed at least five people and injured more than 20 – stand on the scale?

Some would describe the attack as a legitimate military operation. The bomb targeted the lavish birthday celebrations of Colonel-General Aleksandr Chayko, commander-in-chief of Russia's Aerospace Forces (whose son-in-law died in the blast). Chayko commanded the northern group of Russian forces which advanced to the outskirts of Kyiv in February and March 2022, which pro-Ukrainian bloggers maintain makes him ultimately responsible for the massacres of civilians in Bucha and Irpin. Following that logic, the attempted assassination of Chayko stands alongside heroic partisan killings of war criminals – for instance the shooting of Reinhard Heydrich, Reichsprotektor of Bohemia and Moravia, gunned down on a Prague street by British-trained Czech agents in May 1942.

But if you believe the Balzi Rossi bomb was justifiable, what, then, is the difference between that attack and the Irish Republican Army's 1981 nail-bombing of British soldiers at London's Chelsea Barracks, or bomb attacks on Household Cavalry troopers and an army band in Hyde Park and Regent's Park the following year? All were assaults on military personnel in a civilian setting in the cause of overturning a colonial occupation.

Our answer obviously depends on how we feel about the righteousness of the perpetrators' cause. The US and UK have been taking out al-Qaeda and ISIS members in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan by drone attack for years, accepting collateral damage to unlucky civilians as part of the butcher's bill. Few would shed tears for Mohammed Emwazi – "Jihadi John" – killed in a US-UK drone strike in Raqqa in November 2015, or "White Widow" Sally-Anne Jones, terminated using a Predator drone in 2017. Israel's Mossad, with its arsenal of exploding pagers and pinpoint hotel-room strikes, is a world leader in taking out enemies wherever they find them.

We can say that it's fine when Barack Obama smites his enemies, but bad when Putin does it

Nevertheless, approving of extrajudicial execution opens a moral can of worms. We can say that it's fine when Barack Obama smites his enemies but bad when Vladimir Putin does it because we approve of one but not the other. But that argument quickly slides into a dangerous moral ambivalence, a whataboutism of the kind the Kremlin loves to exploit.

Kremlin-controlled Russian media have blamed Ukraine for organizing the latest Moscow bombing. Officials in Kyiv, meanwhile, have remained silent. But the Balzi Rossi explosion is the latest in a long string of bombings targeting Russian officers, occupation officials and propagandists. In August 2022, Darya Dugina, a 29-year-old pro-war commentator and daughter of the nationalist ideologue Aleksandr Dugin, died in a car bomb blast presumably aimed at her father. In April the following year Maxim Fomin, a pro-war military blogger known as Vladlen Tatarsky, was killed by a bomb concealed inside a statuette presented to him as a gift during an event in St. Petersburg. Zakhar Prilepin, a nationalist novelist and commander of pro-Russian forces in the Donbas, was badly injured by another car bomb.

Similar devices have, since 2022, killed three Russian lieutenant generals, a deputy mayor of Stavropol and the founder of a pro-Russian battalion in Ukraine. Ukraine's SBU security service has either denied responsibility or said nothing about bombings on Russian territory. But it has claimed several identical bombings inside occupied Ukraine, including two lawmakers in the Russian-installed assembly in Luhansk, an official at the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant and the former head of the Olenivka prison in Donetsk, all blown up by improvised explosive devices. Occupiers are "a completely legitimate target," SBU sources told Ukrainian media. Ukraine has also claimed responsibility for at least 15 assassinations or attempted assassinations by handgun that killed or wounded,

among others, a Russian submarine commander, a cruise missile software engineer and the deputy head of GRU Russian military intelligence. Russia, for its part, has also organized at least six shooting assassinations inside Ukraine.

What makes some of these bombings especially morally complex is the apparent use of unwitting suicide bombers to deliver the devices. Darya Trepova, an anti-war Russian, maintained that she did not know the statuette that killed Tatarsky contained explosives (she was nonetheless sentenced to 27 years in jail for murder). Zaur Gurtsiev, deputy mayor of Stavropol, and Armen Sargsyan, founder of the pro-Russian "Arbat Battalion," were killed by suicide bombers who were both apparently unwitting pawns with no known patriotic links to Ukraine and no observed desire to die for Kyiv's cause. In

Ultimately we judge the actions of our heroes and villains by who they are, not what they do

October 2022, delivery truck driver Makhir Yusubov picked up a load of goods destined for Crimea after accepting an order on a logistics website. Halfway across the Kerch Bridge the truck detonated, killing Yusubov and damaging the bridge. Vasyl Maliuk, then chief of Ukraine's SBU security service, publicly acknowledged the operation and admitted that Ukrainian services deliberately "used people in the dark." It's not known if the woman who delivered the bomb to the Balzi Rossi – reportedly wrapped as a present – volunteered for a suicide mission or whether she was just another expendable human carrier.

Is there a difference between killing a Russian commander on the battlefield and blowing him up at his own birthday party? You can argue that all's fair in love and war, that the horror inflicted by Russia on Ukraine justifies killing enemy officers even when they're unarmed and off-duty. But that moral choice comes with an uncomfortable trail of logical contingencies. As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote, every man who commits evil does it for reasons he considers good.

In the wake of the Hyde Park bombing, the IRA put out a statement justifying killing British servicemen because "the Irish people have sovereign and national rights which no occupational force can put down." The Kremlin liquidators sent to murder KGB and GRU defectors Alexander Litvinenko and Sergei Skripal undoubtedly saw their victims as traitors who had betrayed their country – and themselves as righteous executioners. Menachem Begin, in his memoir *The Revolt*, claimed that US president Harry Truman "said that he would have joined the 'terrorists' had he been in Eretz Israel during the rule of the British."

Yes, that's a list of very different cases – bombing as an act of war vs poisoning as an act of state revenge, postcolonial independence movements vs sovereign warring states. But that's the point. Circumstances matter. Motivation matters. And here's the nub of the problem. We can easily agree that our ends sometimes justify extrajudicial means, but not the ends of those with whom we disagree. Ultimately we judge the actions of our heroes and villains by who they are, not by the things they do.

To return to the original question: where does the Moscow bomb attack lie on the scale? Operationally, ordering this kind of suicide bombing is an outlier by the standards of any western army or security service – including the Israelis. Accurate targeting, as well as minimizing civilian casualties, is an important part of the moral equation for any democracy. Even if drones inadvertently blow up whole wedding parties in Afghanistan the civilian chiefs who ultimately authorize such operations can be told it was a genuine accident. A 1kg bomb full of ball-bearings brought to a crowded restaurant, as the Balzi Rossi bomb was reported to be, is not, by any stretch of the imagination, a targeted means of assassination.

To be clear, there is no direct evidence that this attack was the work of the Ukrainian government. Indeed I honestly hope that neither the SBU nor the HUR was involved. Because whoever ordered the bombing is treading a dangerous path. First, being found responsible for an indiscriminate attack of this kind would erode the moral superiority that Ukraine undoubtedly holds as the injured party in this conflict. But more dangerously, it opens the door for a new tit-for-tat front in an already supremely vicious war, fought not by guns and missiles but improvised explosive devices in restaurants. Is there a difference between these two methods of dealing death to innocent civilians? For many people, the answer depends who's doing the killing and who's doing the dying.

Goldfinch

He spoilt her. That man.
Nine years after Dad died.
Re-kitted out her wardrobes.
She bought couture coats, scarves,
tall, long-legged leather boots,
burned new gold, autumnal;
braided in seasonal colours,
burgundies and bronze.
Finally found a man who cherished her.
Let her shine. And shine she did,
a glowing goldfinch, as his days dimmed.

They road-tripped across Ireland.
There's a photo;
her stood in some pub in Tipperary,
Guinness pints, centre stage on an upturned barrel;
her, him and another couple,
raising a glass, living it up,
doing the things she never did with Dad
letting life flow, chasing fun,
speeding in her mate's fiancé's flash car,
round the Ring of Kerry, hitting, one after another,
those colourful, shack-like bars.

– Paul Deaton

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DOUGLAS MURRAY

Britain is falling into a mawkish fantasy

I don't know how many readers have visited the grave of Dobby the house-elf, but any who have should immediately be sectioned and have their subscriptions to *The Spectator* canceled.

This strong course of action occurs to me after reading one of those stories that can make you laugh, cry and smack your head into your hands all at once. It relates to a "memorial" which apparently sits on Freshwater West beach in Pembrokeshire, Wales. The area is run by the National Trust – a charity which used to look after our nation's heritage sites.

The beach in question was where filming took place for *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows.* Since then, fans of the film – which spawned a new generation of mewling, ungrateful actors – have been laying stones and pebbles at the spot at which Dobby died, many of them with messages on ("Here lies Dobby, a free elf.") The National Trust has already asked fans not to leave socks on the pile (don't ask), but stones to form a kind of cairn appear perfectly acceptable.

At this stage it might be worth noting that "Dobby" is a fictional character. No such house-elf ever existed. Therefore you might think this rather whimsy-infused "memorial" should not detain us much longer.

Except that this is one of those increasingly typical moments in modern Britain when a fantasy world and the real world come into conflict – and the real world loses the encounter. A £430 million undersea cable linking the UK and Ireland had been due to pass through the area but – thanks to *Harry Potter* fans complaining in their hundreds – was rerouted. Indeed, the cable now passes nearer to some Bronze Age human burial remains in order not to disrupt the nonexistent grave of the never-existent Dobby.

The project manager of this farrago told the media that the hundreds of complaints the company had received had ensured that it took the issue very, very seriously. Simon Ludlam said that, in the end, the cable "went quite close to some real Bronze Age remains, but we avoided Dobby's grave." This solution made "a lot of people very happy," he added, "and Dobby's happy."

At this point I would be happy to pull my head out of my own hands and smack Mr. Ludlam around the face with a sock, a stone or anything else that came to hand.

Firstly, due to matters of taste. Of all the sentimental attitudes which are most painful, surely the worst is this sort of modern British "whimsy." It is as one with the sort of people who, after the death of Elizabeth II, chose to leave Paddington Bear toys among the flowers, or pass around memes online of Paddington leading the late Queen towards the gates of St. Peter.

The Queen Mother's favorite poem – "The Gate of the Year" – includes the line that on treading into the unknown you should "put your hand into the Hand of God." It seemed telling that by the time her sovereign daughter died, the country had ditched the hand of God as hard to put faith in and replaced it with a theology in which the departed should instead place their hand into the hand of Paddington Bear before being received into glory.

Of all the sentimental attitudes which are most painful, the worst is this sort of modern British 'whimsy'

Until the past few years, I would have dismissed such sentimental claptrap as being distinctly un-British. Further, I would have said that while such mawkish sentimentality might still thrive among the Irish, the British would surely keep it at bay. I mention the Irish with justification. Some years ago, a motorway bypass in County Clare had to be altered in order to protect a "sacred" fairy bush. Local "experts" had claimed that if the fairy bush was destroyed to make room for the £100 million bypass then the new roadway might suffer a "curse." More recently a new housing scheme in County Wicklow found itself at the center of a similar row after a "fairy tree" was put at risk. Fortunately the fairy tree survived as the builders built around it.

'Ron prefers horizontal drinking.'

In relating these stories I do not intend to plant in the minds of readers any idea that the Irish are a superstitious and backwards people. I do not say that at all. But it does seem slightly regrettable that protecting the sacred fairy bush of County Clare, or the fairy tree of County Wicklow, seem like perfectly sensible propositions beside diverting an undersea cable in order to avoid disturbing the site of a fantasy character's burial place.

Which brings me to the second problem in all this: that such a story seems awfully telling about a country and its priorities. Over recent years Britain has found it impossible to complete almost any major infrastructure projects. Most of the time this is due to the discovery of a rare earthworm or – as anyone who has tried to restore a property in the countryside will know – that there is evidence of bats. You do not have to have seen a bat, merely have evidence that bats may once have eyed up your property, and you'll discover that your house is no longer your own but has fallen into the joint custodianship of Dave from the local council and any passing bat.

Even this is merely a good-ish intention taken to a typically bureaucratic extreme. No such excuse can be made for the Dobby's grave phenomenon. It is simply indicative of a country where the adults have all taken leave of their senses and handed over the decision-making to children who were never told "no."

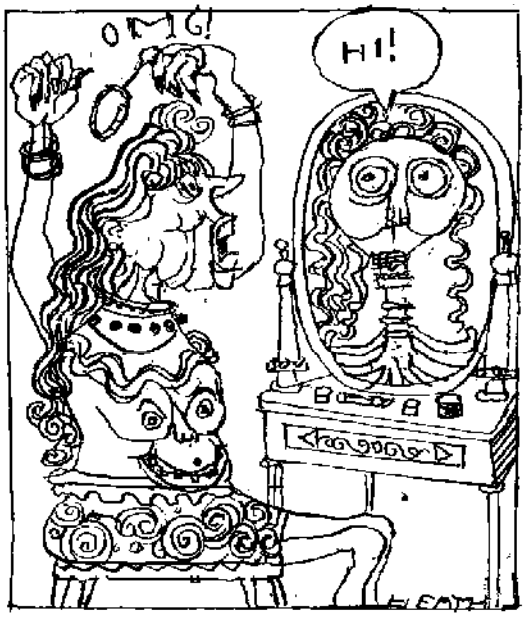
I suppose that if these are the new rules of the game there is an argument for playing along. I would be happy to start by claiming there is a horcrux to be found somewhere in the oil reserves in the North Sea and that unless we start extracting all that oil we risk not finding it and therefore failing to defeat the Dark Lord. Which is not the maddest energy policy I've heard lately.

SPECTATOR.COM/DOUGLASMURRAY
The debate continues online.

Wrinkles in time

Do you have 'Old Money Face'?

ARABELLA BYRNE



Recently, I have started to worry about my face. Early in the morning, before the children wake up, I'm sure I can see ghosts in the downstairs loo mirror. My 20-year-old self's face flashes before me but soon vanishes reproachfully into the crow's feet around my eyes; I didn't like her anyway. My long-deceased father lingers over my cheekbones and draws the smoking lines around my mouth in ash. I frown back. My grandmother, anxious, appears in the split second between posing and relaxing. I squint as she used to when playing bridge. If the past is an inscrutable face, I am reduced to reading, not between the lines but between the wrinkles.

I never thought I would get old – I'm 43 – but it's happening. Admittedly, my lizard-like love of the sun and devotion to fags hasn't helped. I once spent an entire month in Provence lying on a riverbank with no SPF on and smoking Gitanes *sans filtre*. That's some skincare regime. Mercifully, a new buzzword in beauty has appeared – and it suits me down to the last frown line. "Old Money Face" is an active rejection of Kardashian beauty optimization and the reviled 2D "Instagram Face" retrofitted by plastic surgeons after we were taught to edit ourselves through filters on a phone.

Forget fillers, forget Botox, forget the hush of the clinic and the scolding word of the surgeon as he taps the needle. The grandest thing you can do in this beauty revolution is to wear a sensible hat and smear some sun cream from the bottom of a drawer over your mug. Picasso, speaking to Gertrude Stein, once pointed to a face and said: "It is as old as the world." Could he have known, 100 years later, that this would be the greatest compliment of all?

But Old Money Face is more than skin-deep. Like most things to do with being posh, you simply can't buy it. Old Money Face betokens a way of the world that has, rather hilariously, nothing to do with the altar of wealth upon which the beauty industry (worth £28 billion in the UK) relies. Or, as Alan Clark would have it, face work is the surgical equivalent of having to buy your own furniture. Old Money Face speaks to a life spent outside in the country – walking the dogs, riding, gardening – and a stout, immovable skepticism about sun skin damage ("I think climate change is absolutely bloody marvelous, the sun shines more,"

Like most things to do with being posh, you simply can't buy it

one jolly aristocrat tells me during "over the yardarm" drinks in the walled garden). It is the weatherbeaten sign of a life well lived and a suspicious approach to "beauty" – a Mitford-esque belief that one looked in the glass only out of concern rather than vanity.

I can spot Old Money Face a mile off: sunspots from lashings of skiing and sailing; bags under the eyes from too many boozy afternoons at the Chelsea Arts Club; craterous frown lines across the forehead after paying the school fees for four children; and, importantly, smoking lines down either side of the mouth which gives it a slightly doggy, chic look. Its most famous possessor, of course, is the Queen – no stranger to the Gloucestershire wind or the yardarm drink and cig. Other poster girls include the late Mollie, Marchioness of Salisbury, who helped the King design the gardens at Highgrove, and the late, great "Debo," Duchess of Devonshire, who wouldn't have gone near a needle in a fit. Regarding needles, Old Money Face is categorically opposed to Ozempic. "You don't look so wrinkled if you're a bit fatter," a wise OMF confided.

Why now? Are we postface as we were once postmodern? Perhaps we have lived too long in the age of digital visibility: on Instagram, on Zoom – where the face has become suspended from the body – and even within the realm of emojis where affect is short-circuited in a range of variations on the cartoon countenance. And only cartoons could explain "Mar-a-Lago Face," a look worn and engineered by the women of the Trump administration such as Kimberly Guilfoyle, the ambassador to Greece. Mar-a-Lago face constitutes a crude artificiality; perhaps, like its political crucible, it is a dismissal of reality altogether. And similar to its brother philosophy of looksmaxxing, it rests on the credo that everything – from the eye area to the shape of the skull – can be improved. But we have become faced out. For if the female face has become the site of the struggle between time and vanity-induced terror, it was inevitable that it would come undone. Face capital could last only so long; expect the same to happen with semaglutides.

Another early morning dawns and I resolve to seek a professional opinion (for journalistic purposes) on the ghosts in the mirror. Is it Old Money Face, as I hope, or simply the beginnings of Old Hag Face? The plastic surgeon greets me in his immaculate Belgravia clinic with loafered calm and kind assurances. I have, he tells me, "pronounced sun damage" across my forehead and, rather mysteriously, my chin. I lie back and he begins to outline a range of treatments: light exfoliation, laser treatment, bespoke pigmentation creams. I pretend to listen, but I am elsewhere, lost in a gallery of faces that I don't recognize. I leave the clinic with my dark glasses on, light a fag and sit in the sun.

MARY WAKEFIELD

The hidden victims of 'Big Surrogacy'

A court in Dallas, Texas is due to decide the fate of a small baby called Gabriel or Rumi, depending on who you believe his mother is. Gabriel-Rumi is at present a sort of Schrödinger's baby, suspended between possible futures and suspended also, poor sod, between life and death: born with a heart defect, headed now for surgery.

Gabriel-Rumi's short life has so far been the subject of a media frenzy, for reasons I'll explain, but should he later look back and be appalled at all the fuss, I'd like him to know what a service he's already done the world.

The global surrogacy business surges on, valued at almost $40 billion, heading for $300 billion by 2030; an accelerating factory belt of babies commissioned, grown, sold. No one who profits from it wants to pause the gravy train or look too hard for harm. But the case of baby Gabriel-Rumi makes the cost of surrogacy – all surrogacy – painfully clear.

Gabriel-Rumi's biological parents, Omar Ahmed and Nausheen Gilkar, are from California. They conceived using IVF and decided, for unknown reasons, to use a surrogate. Perhaps Nausheen couldn't carry the baby, or perhaps, like a growing number of western women, she'd put in the hard yards at the gym, looked hot on her socials and didn't fancy stretch marks. Some women now use surrogates because they're freaked out by the thought of labor. "Social surrogacy," it's called, to distinguish it from the medical sort. Is it morally right to outsource physical pain?

Anyway, for whatever reason, Nausheen and Omar contracted Worldwide Surrogacy Specialists LLC, WSS contacted McKenna West and Gabriel-Rumi was implanted. All was dandy until the 20-week scan, when it was discovered that he had a heart condition, hypoplastic left heart syndrome (HLHS), which would require surgery shortly after birth.

At that point, Nausheen and Omar decided to abort, which contractually they had a right to do. McKenna at first agreed and made the appointment, before realizing that she couldn't bring herself to kill the baby. Children with HLHS can lead happy lives and Gabriel deserved a chance, she said, and she offered to have him and bring him up herself. McKenna didn't want cash; this wasn't any sort of shakedown. It was the baby she was thinking of, and at a later stage she offered to give up any parental rights if Nausheen and Omar would agree to the life-saving surgery.

The couple thought it best to kill their son. McKenna was prepared to suffer and to disrupt her existing life in order for him to live. Which woman acted more like a mother? I'm not attacking Nausheen. All over the world mothers abort babies for less serious reasons. But parental love is sacrificial. It was McKenna who demonstrated that love.

And is it all that surprising? I remember the 20-week scan as a turning point in my own pregnancy. The size, the heartbeat, the obvious life of the baby jolted me into a realization that here, truly, was another person, and that I loved him and had a duty to care for him. In many ways it was a terrible realization for a woman as irresponsible as me, and it came with a premonition of all the future worry and grief that love involves. I think of that moment as the beginning of motherhood, and it was entirely bound up with the physical closeness of the baby. Distance allows for denial – in pregnancy as in all manner of other scenarios. When your aged grandparents are at a distance, for instance, it's easy to persuade yourself that it's fine not to visit, less unsettling for them. Up close, the truth outs.

A woman who carries a child isn't just storage – she's bonded and the baby feels that bond, too

A convenient language has evolved to keep the fiction of uncomplicated surrogacy alive and to persuade us all that you can fracture motherhood: split off the egg from the womb, and the womb from the parenting, with absolutely no harm done. Surrogates are known as "gestational carriers," and like egg donors they're treated as if they've done no more than a regular good turn, given blood maybe. But the difference between Nausheen and McKenna's reactions to their son's disease shows how wrongheaded this notion is.

A woman who carries a child isn't just storage – she's bonded and the baby feels that bond, too. Well, of course it does. The womb is its whole reality. A baby is born already knowing and listening out for a birth mother's voice, and her smell and her heartbeat – and when it's deprived of them, it suffers. We know now that if a baby is parted from his birth mother, he interprets her absence as life-threatening and it triggers an emergency stress response. His cortisol spikes and his blood pressure rises. It's one of those many biological realities that people who call themselves progressive try to will away.

They insist on "bodily autonomy" and a mother's right to choose right up to birth, for abortion. But if a surrogate like McKenna wants to save a baby, I wonder, is it still "her body, her choice?"

The couple did not take McKenna up on her offer to care for their baby. They insisted on abortion, and so she fled with Gabriel-Rumi on board to Texas, where she felt he was safer. Texas not only bans abortion in almost all circumstances but gives the woman who carries the child, rather than the commissioning parents, the authority to decide on medical care.

Gabriel-Rumi was born on August 12 in Dallas, and he owes his life to McKenna West, but even so he may never be allowed to meet her. Nausheen and Omar are now the baby's legal parents and they've procured a court order preventing McKenna from coming near him. They're also suing her, seeking up to $100,000 for breach of contract, though I'm not sure where they think she'll find that sort of money. And who knows, should they win the battle for long-term custody, how they'll possibly explain to their son why they decided to destroy the woman who saved his life.

Rescue mission

There's still time to save the West

MATHIAS DÖPFNER

When *The Spectator* asked me whether I would write an essay on "Why we need to strengthen the West," I was delighted – and bemused. Why is this even up for debate? That we must explain and justify "the West" at all indicates just how weak it has become. It would be better if it did not need strengthening but were simply strong. It is not. The West has become an invalid.

What exactly, though, are we trying to strengthen? The West is an idea, not a location. It rests on four pillars: Athens – where democracy was born. Rome – the cradle of the rule of law. Jerusalem – where Judeo-Christian values placed the inviolable dignity of the individual at the center. And finally, the Enlightenment – whose great thinkers in London, Paris and Königsberg anchored humanism, individual civil liberties, the separation of powers and the division of church and state.

Herodotus observed a phenomenon shortly after the fall of the Peisistratid tyranny, which remains the most vital lesson in political philosophy to this day. The Athenians, he noted, had fought no better than their neighbors as long as they were ruled by tyrants. Yet the moment they threw off the yoke of tyranny, every individual was motivated to give his utmost, proving decisively stronger and more successful in battle. Why? Because he was now working for himself, not for a master. In that single observation Herodotus formulated the timeless plea for self-determination and liberty – the core idea of the West.

This idea also shapes a view of humanity articulated by Immanuel Kant. Man is not perfect. Kant wrote that "out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made." In the western view of mankind, this implies: nor should it ever be.

Freedom's most important word is "no." Dissent is self-determination. It is liberating to say: "No, I see it differently." With "no," the freedom to think and act begins. The freedom to say no stands in stark contrast to the unfreedom of having to say yes. Democracies are no-saying societies. Dictatorships are yes-saying societies. Liberty is inherently critical of authority; it permits and encourages contradiction – precisely what autocrats cannot abide. That is why dictators wish to weaken the West.

Freedom's most important word is 'no.' Dissent is self-determination

That the West – the open society based on liberty, the rule of law and human rights – is on the defensive is an empirical fact. According to data gathered over decades by the think tank Freedom House, global freedom declined in 2025 for the 20th consecutive year – deteriorating in 54 countries while improving in only 35. The most damning figure: a mere 21 percent of the world's population lives in countries classified as "free," compared with 46 percent two decades ago. Autocracies have grown more numerous, more domestically repressive and more externally aggressive. The West is currently threatened and weakened from within and without. Its three great external adversaries are China, Russia and Islamism – particularly Iran and its terrorist networks.

China's goal is to become the leading global economy by 2049 at the latest – the centenary of the People's Republic. The combination of communist autocracy and turbocharged state capitalism has proven remarkably efficient, not least because the West made itself a useful idiot in this impressive growth story. In hindsight, admitting China as a full member of the World Trade Organization in 2001 was the single greatest blunder of western trade policy. The naivety or shortsightedness lay in granting membership to a major nondemocratic state that was neither able nor willing to abide by the rules of free trade, while simultaneously blessing it with developing-nation status, conferring all manner of exemptions and preferences. It was akin to giving the most ruthless bully on the playground special rights to beat up his playmates.

In the short term, China brought growth and prosperity to all parties; in the long term, it shifted the global balance of power, creating perilous dependencies. The most tragic example is the German automotive industry. For decades Germany's industrial giants banked on cheap manufacturing and lucrative consumer markets in China. In doing so, they failed to grasp the difference between good business relations and strategic dependence. The friendly cooperation ended the moment China acquired the requisite know-how to launch a heavily subsidized assault on the German car industry, even as Chinese domestic markets were quietly closed off. It

was a Chinese masterclass in expansive geopolitics carried out by capitalist means. *Wandel durch Handel* ("change through trade") – the naive hope of the 1990s – inverted into its opposite. Change occurred, but not toward greater freedom, rather toward greater unfreedom.

This trajectory is accelerated by the AI arms race between America and China. The US still holds the upper hand. Yet China, through the total surveillance of its population, enjoys vastly greater access to data, unencumbered by regulatory or ethical constraints. Moreover, there are growing indications that China is actively fueling AI-skeptical sentiment across western social media. Propaganda aimed at inducing anxiety and slowing down rivals is taking its toll. America appears more tech-skeptic than ever. It is not unlikely that the next presidential campaign will hinge partly on which party promises to better protect voters from AI. China understands that whoever dominates AI will dominate economically and politically. It seems only a matter of time before it leads in this arena too.

The woke movement has become the Trojan horse of the anti-westernism loved by dictators and autocrats

While America has at least recognized this bitter reality and reacts with varying degrees of success, Europe lives in denial. Beneath the soothing bromides of the EU, the continent is gradually drifting toward becoming an amusement park for Asian tourists: high quality of life paired with diminishing productivity and value creation.

The global trend is clear. Democratic economies are weakening, nondemocratic ones are strengthening. In this tectonic shift, the implications for military power are routinely underestimated. China is still viewed by many as a militarily passive, purely economic power. That picture is false.

The Chinese military budget nearly doubled from $145 billion in 2015 to $281 billion this year. The ultimate test case is Taiwan. Annexing the democratic, western-leaning island nation and integrating it into a monolithic communist republic is one of Xi Jinping's main missions. China will strike as soon as the odds are high enough that America lacks the strength to intervene – perhaps because western resources have been depleted across other theaters of conflict in Ukraine and the Middle East. Should China achieve its objective without effective western resistance, the global order will be fundamentally altered.

Vladimir Putin's war of conquest in Ukraine plays a remarkably helpful role in this strategy. Even if the war is far from a military success for Putin, he achieves two vital objectives: dividing the West by driving the US and the EU further apart, and exhausting American and European military stockpiles. Putin – ever the student of western weakness – tested how far he could go, and went remarkably far. Now that Ukraine has evolved into a formidable asset in modern AI warfare, he is turning to a weaker target: hybrid warfare against Germany and other EU nations promises less resistance and greater prestige at home.

Putin finds ready allies in Iran and other Islamist-dominated regimes. Islamism hijacks religion for terrorist ends. The primary enemy of fanatical Islam, as the founding Hamas Charter of 1988 explicitly states, is the world of those they deem godless – the Judeo-Christian West. The destruction of Israel and all Jews is merely the first step. The next is the weakening, infiltration and violent reeducation of Europe and ultimately America.

It remains difficult to fathom that the genocidal attack on Israel by Hamas led not to a global wave of solidarity with Israel, but to a massive surge in anti-Semitism. The weakest justification is the claim that Israel's retaliatory measures in Gaza after 7 October exceeded all bounds, or that its domestic and foreign policy are deeply questionable. Has the Israeli government made mistakes? Undoubtedly. Is that a reason to be anti-Semitic, transferring criticism of Israel onto all Jews? Absolutely not.

Yet the trend persists. Anti-Semitism has become a pop-cultural zeitgeist, particularly among the young. Germany, of all nations, recorded 8,725 anti-Semitic incidents last year – the highest figure among the seven countries examined by the 2026 Annual Report on Antisemitism, ahead of the US (6,274) and the UK (3,700). The trajectory is the key: from 2021 to 2025, incidents rose by 124 percent in France, 131 percent in the US and 215 percent in Germany.

The primary cause of this development is a reckless, runaway migration policy. Islamist milieus – including strategically placed jihadists – have spent years undermining western societies and their foundational values. Pointing this out is not Islamophobic. True Islamophobia lies in failing to distinguish between those who wish to integrate peacefully into the West and those who enter to abuse its systems and destroy its values. Under the guise of compassion, uncontrolled and frequently illegal immigration contributes not only to the West's cultural self-abandonment, but fuels – by way of reaction – the rise of right- and left-wing populists and extremists.

'I can't wait for the anti-Establishment to become the Establishment.'

Michel Houellebecq provided the dystopian vision for this in his 2015 novel *Submission*. He describes a France where the Muslim Brotherhood has taken power: a frightened country where women wear progressively longer dresses until skirts disappear entirely; where unsuccessful white men rejoice at enjoying multiple marriages with underage wives; and where news of Islamist terror attacks is eventually suppressed so as not to alarm the populace. The book depicts the exhaustion of western society. Reality appears to be mimicking fiction in the most gruesome fashion.

The woke movement has become the Trojan horse of the anti-westernism loved by dictators and autocrats. It is the epitome of the anti-freedom triangle, seamlessly intertwining anti-Semitism, anti-Americanism and anti-capitalism. The word "West" has long been suspect in politically correct circles. The mandated terms in geopolitical discourse are now the "Global South" and the "Global North." For those using the phrase "Global South," linking the West to colonial guilt is no accident – it is the very purpose of the narrative.

Is its current crisis the very medicine required for the West's renewal? That is the best-case scenario

Woke ideology often bears the hallmark of good intentions: fighting racism, protecting minorities, questioning privilege and confronting colonial history. In reality, however, it is the inversion of almost every value and objective of civilization.

In the competition for victimhood status, the concepts of progress, competition, growth and prosperity erode. In the West, being successful was once better than being unsuccessful. Wealth was better than poverty. Beauty was better than ugliness. Under woke ideology, all this is reversed. It resembles a manual for western self-abolition, born out of self-hatred.

Is the West ultimately weakening itself out of a bad conscience? Will we only realize what we stand to lose when it is too late? Or is its current crisis the very medicine required for the West's renewal? That would be the best-case scenario: a catharsis on the precipice of failure, because we finally grasp what is at stake and realize that the alternatives are far worse.

Why do we need to strengthen the West? Because otherwise the tyrants win.

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The whataboutery delusion

Stop with the totalitarian name-calling

PETER HITCHENS

If you live near the frontiers of acceptable opinion, as any thinking person must surely do, you quickly find that these badlands are policed mainly with insults and innuendos. And so you learn one morning, to your surprise, that you are an apologist for some repulsive regime which you strongly dislike. If you have been especially daring, you may be a "war crimes denier" as well. Or you are charged with "whataboutery," a word its users think will magically erase your case. Or, in many ways best of all, you are a conspiracy theorist.

There is a myth that this phrase was invented by the CIA to try to discredit protesters against the Vietnam War, but the expression is far older than that. Even so, like all these dismissive epithets, it is remarkably effective – especially among the great electronic mobs of antisocial media.

The word "conspiracy" is one of the strangest in our language. The authorities will readily allege it when they have very little actual evidence against a defendant. Nobody sniggers when they do so. But a private individual will be laughed to scorn if he suggests that powerful or influential people might have met privately to discuss a common aim – as in fact they do all the time. The moment the tinfoil hat of "conspiracy theorist" descends on your head, nothing you say will be taken seriously.

As well as suggesting mild insanity, the word also creates dark images of men in Guy Fawkes hats, with daggers concealed in their cloaks, whispering to each other in a tavern in Deptford. I have long tried to counter this nonargument by pointing out that the most common conspiracies in modern Britain go by the prosaic name of "lunch."

When I worked as a Lobby reporter at the Palace of Westminster, I learned quickly that very little could be picked up in the Lobby itself. The key to success was to join or form a lunch group with one or two others, and invite senior politicians to spill the beans over an expensive meal they didn't have to pay for.

I do not think that the Sainted Lord Moore, who was in such a group with me in the Thatcher era, will mind terribly if I mention this. His presence had a magical effect. Almost nobody turned us down. Many of those we pumped for leaks, gossip and indiscretions are now dead, including Lord Hailsham, who turned up at Rules in Maiden Lane straight from the Woolsack, still wearing his Lord Chancellor's kit of doublet and hose. If the readers of British newspapers knew just how much of the supposed political news placed before them is cooked up in such places, over the smoked eels or the steak and kidney pudding, I expect they'd be envious.

But this is lighthearted stuff compared with "whataboutery." This expression really did begin in the Cold War, when Soviet propagandists would respond to criticism of their police state by saying that black people in the US got a raw deal. The two obviously

If you cannot distinguish between oven-ready propaganda and fact, should you even engage in politics?

weren't comparable, and in any case Soviet Moscow was one of the most racially bigoted cities in the world. It was false equivalence of opposites. But we have recently moved into the age of regime change, in which we are expected to applaud wars against other countries because their regimes are bad. But, oh dear, what if our allies also have bad regimes?

I am as revolted by the Iranian despotism as anyone else. Perhaps more so. They once threw a friend of mine into solitary on false charges of spying, a hideous experience of injustice and cruelty. But the "West" is somehow unmoved by the comparable repressions of Turkey, its prisons bulging with journalists, of Saudi Arabia, with its dungeons and bone saws, and Egypt, with its street massacres of opposition supporters. We are very friendly with these countries. How so if our hatred for oppression in Iran is genuine? If I make the simple point that our supposed objections to the Tehran state are a pretext, not a reason, then I am accused of "whataboutery." Is this right or fair? If you really cannot distinguish between oven-ready propaganda and serious fact, should you even engage in politics?

'We struggle to keep the garden under control these days.'

The inventor of whataboutery, as I sometimes point out, was Our Lord Jesus Christ, who in a memorable bit of preaching, asked "And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye." (Matthew 7, vv 3-5, if you're interested).

As for being an apologist for foreign despots, this has now become the standard objection to anyone who dissents from the official line on the Ukraine war. And it is an official line. Government buildings in London fly the Ukrainian flag, an unprecedented gesture. No doubt there are some people who support the Russian invasion of Ukraine (I have always deplored it). There may even be people who support its aims, whatever they actually are (I have no idea). I am even told that I am a Putin sympathizer because I was once a Trotskyist, logic so mad that it would take pages to dismantle.

The possibility that I might take the view I do because I am a British patriot and don't see what interest Britain has in prolonging, arming and financing this conflict is not considered. This is all quite trivial now, and I can cope with it. But it troubles me because it is the embryo of a police state mindset, in which dissent is automatically treachery. Argue with me, beat me in debate, anything you like. But don't call me by these totalitarian names.

Peter Hitchens is a columnist for the Mail on Sunday.

ALAMY

In Scene 33 of the Bayeux Tapestry, Halley's Comet, which appeared in the spring of 1066, is regarded as an omen of doom. A frightened man rushes to deliver the bad news to the newly crowned Harold

BOOKS

A cunning character

The last Anglo-Saxon king made few mistakes — but Hastings proved a battle too far

Alex Burghart

Harold: Warrior King
by Tom Licence
Yale University Press, £25, pp. 416

Oh Harold. So near and yet so far. So close and yet no cigar. In January 1066, the world (well, England) was at his feet. Two hundred and eighty-two days later he was battle meat. On day one he became the richest ruler Anglo-Saxon England had ever known. In late September, he defeated the hardest bastard in Europe (Harald Hardrada). In mid-October, England was changed forever, but not by him.

He had, of course, no right whatsoever to be king. Sure, he was Edward the Confessor's brother-in-law, but under the sacred rules of hereditary power that gets you zip. He claimed that Edward had promised him the throne (he hadn't), but, again, that ain't how the royal circus rolls. Moreover, there *was* a blood heir – Edgar Ætheling, the great-grandson of Ethelred the Unready – whom Harold had sworn to support. He reneged, pulled off an epic coup and became the only Englishman ever to assume the throne without one drop of royal blood in his veins. Somehow, later generations came to believe that he had been on the side of right. How on God's merry earth did this happen?

Tom Licence's superb biography – ingeniously timed for the Bayeux Tapestry's return – sets out to rebuild the man afresh from first principles and primary sources. A central and often blithely discarded fact is that Harold was half Danish (on his mother's side; the name is Danish and was not used by Englishmen before his time.) Licence's Harold has a touch of the Viking about him – he's a taker of slaves and a man who had no qualms about ravaging English lands when politics demanded it (poor old Somerset). He was lascivious to boot: two wives, perhaps in bigamy; a reputation as an adulterer; and at least one illegitimate son. Domesday Book records "a certain concubine of Harold's" owning property in Canterbury.

The son of Earl Godwin of Wessex, the great survivor and royal fixer extraordinaire, Harold was made Earl of East Anglia in his early twenties. Historians have often asserted that the "House of Godwin" was a potent force, hemming in a weak King Edward. Licence shows it to have been a far from tightly knit family but full of fractures and disunities that often brought the senior siblings (Earls Swegn, Harold and Tostig, and Edith, the Confessor's queen) to blows.

Harold became the only Englishman ever to assume the throne without one drop of royal blood in his veins

For all his roaring and raiding, Harold did not waste the talents or opportunities which God and Godwin had given him. Raised to Earl of Wessex on his father's death, he became the king's top dog. He took command of the southwest Midlands and used this base to attack the Welsh kingdom of Gwent. Licence reveals how Harold deployed his military wiles to bring about the death of King Gruffydd ap Llywelyn, seize part of his domain and have his wife.

The ultimate power plays were to come. One of the author's most intriguing theories is that the great northern rebellion of 1065 – which saw Edward's favorite, Tostig, tossed out of his Northumbrian earldom – was masterminded by Harold, who then emerged, to Edward's fury, as the *de facto* successor to the throne. This is major and fascinating revisionism. It has ordinarily been thought that, in 1066, the English chose Harold either because they needed a warrior to fend off invasions and the Ætheling was too weedy, or because Harold's people pretended that Edward's dying breath had left him as heir. Licence makes the case that, with Edward old and ill, Harold fomented discontent in the north and presented himself to his peers as the only man who could bring order. This being so, the succession question may have actually been resolved in 1065, rather than on Edward's death in 1066. Where Licence perhaps goes a smidge too far is in suggesting that this was the only viable course for the kingdom. The stench of ambition can be smelled 960 years down the way. Harold had options. He chose himself.

In any case, a badder beast with a yet more spurious claim was coming. Licence is persuasive in showing that, up against it, Harold made few mistakes as king. Cunning and luck gave him victory against Hardrada. The use of his fleet may have spared some of his troops the forced march back from Yorkshire. And even after two critical battles in the north, the English ran the Conqueror close in the south. Alas, Hastings was a battle too far.

There is much the specialists will long debate. But all future biographers will need to wrestle with the man Licence has assembled: a shagger, a chancer, an oath-breaker, a soldier and a grandmaster of the great political game. Here is a three-dimensional Harold who stands in his own time and on his own terms, and who, for all his human faults, is still, like the blazon on his banner at Hastings, "an armed warrior woven in pure gold."

A media revolution

Dennis Duncan

Hot Type: The Magnificent Machine That Gave Birth to Mass Media and Drove Mark Twain Mad
by Jeff Jarvis
Bloomsbury, £17.99, pp. 384

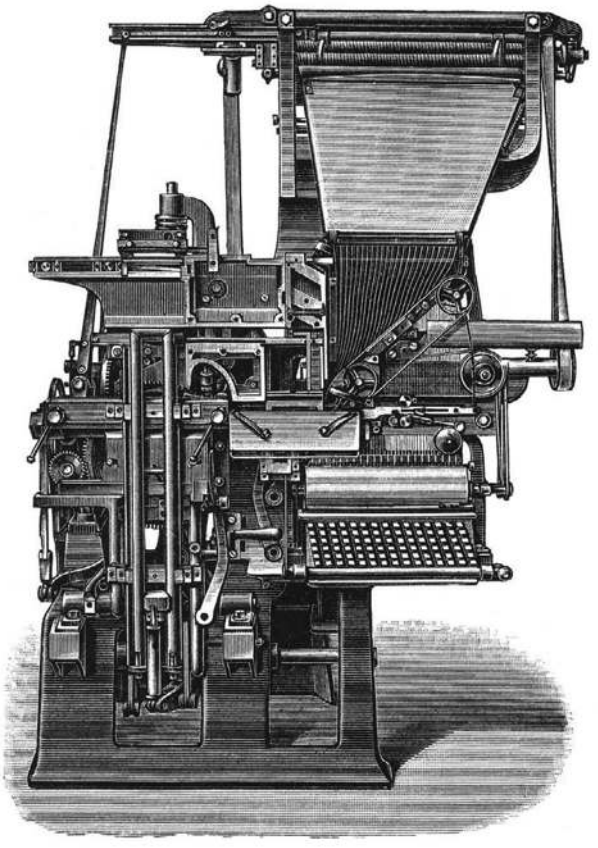
Here's a quiz for you. On the third floor of the New York Public Library is a vast mural painted by Edward Laning in the 1930s. It's called "The Story of the Recorded Word" and it's divided into four scenes, each one a pivotal stage in the development of writing. Can you guess what they are?

I daresay you managed to picture something resembling the third scene: a bearded Johannes Gutenberg showing off a page of type from his new invention, the printing press. I think you might have got the second one, too: a medieval monk, with quills and inkpot, copying out a manuscript in his scriptorium. Perhaps, if you're religiously inclined, you even guessed the first: Moses receiving the Ten Commandments carved into stone. But what about the fourth scene? That's right: it's Ottmar Mergenthaler, in the offices of the *New-York Tribune*, demonstrating his Linotype machine to the newspaper baron Whitelaw Reid. Of course it is.

In the 1880s, Linotype's invention seemed as momentous as Moses on the mount or Gutenberg's movable type. What was it, then, and why does its inclusion in this great lineage look so quaint now? Jeff Jarvis's *Hot Type* is the story of the rise and fall of Mergenthaler's miraculous machine. Ignore the subtitle, by the way. That's something that publishers do: make you ham up the celebrity angle. TL;DR: Mark Twain was the principal investor in a machine called the Paige Compositor, the Betamax of newspaper typesetters, and he lost eyewatering sums of money on it. The hero here is Mergenthaler, and the villain is Reid.

A series of inventions radically increased the speed at which newspapers could be produced

Over the course of the 19th century, a series of inventions radically increased the speed at which newspapers could be produced and distributed. The steam-powered press – introduced at the *Times* in 1814 with a kind of union-busting secrecy (hold on to that thought) – brought printing speeds up to thousands of impressions per hour; the telegraph meant that far-off news could be reported at the speed of electricity; the ability to make paper from wood pulp rather than linen rag reduced production costs; and the railways widened circulation. By the 1870s, it was clear that the last remaining bottleneck in the mass media system was typesetting. Since the days of Gutenberg four centuries earlier, every letter that was printed had to be handpicked, one by one, by a compositor standing in front of a case containing thousands of tiny metal pieces of type.



Linotype typesetting machine, 1897

Imagine this sentence, this exact one – capital I, lower case m, then an a, a g, and so on. In letterpress printing, each letter requires an arm movement to the typecase and back. Imagine this whole article, this whole issue in fact. Or let's say your *Spectator* is not a weekly but a daily, and that new stories might break urgently, perhaps just an hour before the publication goes to press. Even with a large team of (skilled, highly paid) compositors, the scale of the thing hardly bears thinking about. Newspapers of the 19th century were notably thinner than they are today, often only a single sheet folded into four pages. If only someone could take a typewriter keyboard (the Remington company had successfully commercialized their "Type-Writer" machine, with its QWERTY layout, in 1873) and adapt it, so that instead of just making an inked impression on paper it would line up the metal type that could then be placed on to a printing press.

The race, then, was on, with inventors like Twain's disastrous acquaintance James Paige trying to replicate the work of the compositor reaching to the typecase each time a key is struck. The great advantage of Mergenthaler, a young German immigrant living in Baltimore, was that he had never worked in printing and was not therefore wedded to its processes.

To a letterpress printer, Mergenthaler's innovation seemed like a wild one. Traditionally, all those individual pieces of type were cast from molten metal at a type foundry, then purchased by printers, often by the ton. What if, thought Mergenthaler, instead of picking out pieces of type, the machine picked out the tiny molds that the foundry used, then cast these as a single metal slug? This made a line of type (hence the name) ready to be laid out by the editor arranging the columns for printing. A Linotype machine, then, is its own type foundry. It has a pot of molten metal, and yesterday's news can be melted down and recast into today's.

Jarvis, the founder of *Entertainment Weekly* and a former editor at the *New York Daily News*, knows a thing or two about journalism. *Hot Type* is a labor of love and a tribute to the machinery on which he cut his teeth. As a lifelong newspaperman, he understands how to tell a story with charm and wit. His chapter on the aftermath of Mergenthaler's breakthrough – the explosion in the number of newspapers and magazines circulating, the thickening of their contents with supplements and Sunday editions, the tilt toward advertising as the primary source of profit – is as brisk and clear an essay on mass media as one could hope for.

Hot Type is primarily an American tale, but it ends in Wapping. In 1986, the striking print unions failed to stop Rupert Murdoch from forcing through the shift from Linotype to phototypesetting, whereby a page could be printed from its camera-ready paste-up. Setting up a page of newsprint was no longer a matter of raised metal type, but of typewriter, scalpel and glue. Wisely, the NYPL resisted updating their mural. Within a couple of decades the photo era had given way to the digital. If there is to be a new panel in "The Story of the Recorded Word" then surely it should be of Steve Jobs thumbing a hasty text: Sent from my iPhone.

GETTY IMAGES

Speechless messages

Bryan Appleyard

The Kiss: A History of Passion and Power
by Katie Barclay
Reaktion Books, £20, pp. 240

Kissing is a tricky subject. It has a complex, baffling history. The kiss of a baby is one thing; the kiss of lust something quite else. Kings, generals and prelates used to kiss, as did *mafiosi* – often before killing. The kiss has many meanings, all of which are explored in this informative, if sometimes wearing, book. Finally, a warning: if you're queasy about arse-kissing, don't read it.

But then you would be missing a lot. Katie Barclay, a diligent Australian academic, has written an "overview of the world of the kiss in Europe from medieval times to the present." Her opening words begin listing the startling variety of the kissing involved: "Smooch, snog, pash, smack, peck, canoodle..." But the core of the book concerns the changing historical connotations of osculation.

Nowadays a kiss denotes something primarily sexual, largely because of mass media. Nothing sells like sex, and so the snog is the dominant form of the kiss in the contemporary imagination. This is followed by familial kisses – which, strangely, may be lifesavers. American insurance companies have claimed that men who were kissed goodbye by their wives before driving to work were less likely to have car crashes. I find this a little threadbare, but maybe...

Barclay sees the kiss of peace as a "central ritual of medieval life for Europeans." We are told that for many Christians the mouth was the entry to both the body and soul, so taking the Eucharist could signal an intimate form of a kiss. The most notorious use of the Christian kiss was when Judas kissed Jesus to indicate he was the one who should be arrested and crucified by the Romans. Another case of perilous intimacy involved St. Francis Assisi in 1206, climbing down from his horse to kiss and give alms to a leper, who then disappeared.

Should men kiss each other? In 18th-century France, "Lamourette's kiss" was a way of bonding men in the legislative assembly. At the same time, the British were distancing themselves from man-on-man snogging and replacing it with handshakes. The Danes produced an osculatory text in *The Kiss and its History* (1901) by Kristoffer Nyrop: "We all yearn for kisses and we all seek them: it is idle to struggle against this passion." Scandinavian eroticism was thus unleashed.

Richard Wagner suggested that "the kiss of love is the first intimation of death," but then modernity brought us the "kiss of life," by which a dying person could be resuscitated by the application of lips and blowing in air. (It happened to me once, but I was unconscious and unaware.) The present century pursued osculatory truth in brain scans, designed to see what exactly is happening when we kiss. But this is difficult. So scientists resorted instead to monitoring people as they viewed others kissing. It turned out that watching same-sex kissing produced the most striking results. But it was all still unclear: "Measuring the impacts of the kiss remains a fraught and rather futile business," Barclay observes.

Finally, there's that arse-kissing – "an inversion of the holy kiss, a corrupted ritual used by heretics and witches to shame and humiliate others." It was apparently much favored by the Waldensian movement that began in 12th-century France. The practice crops up quite often in this book – and seems to be considered OK for animals. I will pursue the subject no further.

Barclay's scholarship is formidable, but the deluge of information can be confusing. Were, for example, medieval kisses never sexual? Surely all kinds of kisses are going on all the time. I hope so.

Culture wars

Andrey Kurkov

Ukrainian Lessons: Art in a Time of War
by Charlotte Higgins
Jonathan Cape, £22, pp. 272

"The nonsense was over at last," wrote the Lithuanian-Polish poet Czesław Miłosz in 1939, as a period of uncertainty gave way to the horrors of World War Two. Charlotte Higgins quotes these words at the beginning of *Ukrainian Lessons,* describing the outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine after eight years of "local" warfare in the Donbas and the annexation of Crimea. From the first pages of this profound study of the impact of war on culture, replete with life stories, the author places the Russo-Ukrainian conflict within the context of global cultural history and geopolitics. References to Rwanda in 1994 and the bloody events in Londonderry in 1972 are in no way out of place.

Higgins, a celebrated arts journalist, took up her first Ukrainian assignment in September 2022 and found herself both "inside" the war and inside Ukrainian culture, which, like everything else, had become the target of Russian drones and missiles. The same autumn she began taking language lessons online from a teacher living in Ternopil.

Her latest book is about Ukrainian culture, which is at war with Russian culture, and has regularly fallen victim to Russian imperialism. It is filled with the stories of artists, writers and poets whose voices I recognize, and is organized not in chapters, but in "lessons," each with a date. Higgins regards her experiences surrounded by such figures in the war-torn country as an education, something akin to a fascinating course of lectures during which you see artifacts at the precise moment attempts are being made to destroy them. The way our attention is drawn to all manner of things that could disappear at any time makes *Ukrainian Lessons* far more than just another book about the war.

The title is significant. We get miniature language lessons – which create a rhythm and a vivid sense of Higgins's involvement in the events she describes. But we also learn much from her conversations with the writers and poets she meets, who explain what the war is doing to the language and culture – how metaphors disappear and why literary experimentation, so familiar in peacetime, becomes an atavism. War inflicts pain on everything it touches. It is precisely this wounded reality that becomes the raw material of culture. Artists, writers, filmmakers and musicians begin to perceive culture not only as a victim but also as a weapon. "No metaphors work against a man with a machine gun," says the Lviv-based poet Halyna Kruk during one of her events. Then, in a conversation with Higgins, she adds: "I'm sorry that poetry doesn't kill."

No matter how hard these people try to "arm themselves," culture remains a victim of war. But its wounds encourage the most unlikely characters to rush to its aid. Among the many inspiring stories told here, those of the volunteers who rescue works of art from war zones stand out. We hear of two friends, Leonid Marushchak and Arif Bagirov, who, without official instructions or permits, risked traveling 22 times to the besieged historic city of Bakhmut to retrieve treasures. Bagirov, a self-proclaimed former hooligan, entrusted his life to the more decisive Marushchak, who drove his wife's Mini into places mainly accessible only by tank.

On another perilous trip, having swapped the Mini for a more spacious Mercedes Sprinter, the two drove to the city of Lysychansk to save the contents of a small museum devoted to the Ukrainian poet Volodymyr Sosiura, including his hat. Higgins asks Bagirov whether he was afraid to die. He answers:

> I told myself, "Listen, Arif, these are your last days. You might as well live them brightly. Make your death beautiful." And if I die for the sake of Volodymyr Sosiura's hat? That would have been the most beautiful death of all.

This book is full of vibrant, energized personalities – the sort you don't often meet in peacetime. They emerge against a backdrop of ruins, fires and death, which they ignore. The threat to Ukraine's heritage is described with the urgency of a thriller. *Ukrainian Lessons* conveys a message from all the brave people Higgins meets – those still alive, and those, like the novelist Victoria Amelina, who did not survive to see its publication.

ARTS

Style counsel

Remembering Christopher Gibbs, the aesthete, collector and collagist who connected with Everyone and created a new patron class

Jonathan Meades

Style, self-evidently among those who pursue an interest in such affairs, is, according to the Comte de Buffon, the man himself – the essence, the heart, the bowel, the Bovril. While, among the much greater majority who pursue an ignorance in such affairs, it is an assumed gamut of off-the-peg tics, props, accent – style is something bolted on to a being's chassis and core in the hope that it will hold.

We can be certain which of these two nugatory classifications better suits the late Christopher Gibbs (1938-2018) who in the course of his long, more or less antiquarian life encountered Everyone, absolutely Everyone. "Everyone" in this instance unhelpfully signifies little beside the people, per se, whom Gibbs met, smiled at, sold to, bought from, bought for, advised and charmed. How he charmed! His name and the promise of his presence defined a once significant strand of 20th-century society and never failed to nourish one's *amour propre*. It transcended generations.

Whether your hashish comes from Joujouka and your rugs from Taroudant is today no longer a matter of any minute: it was, however briefly, a most urgent preoccupation of Everyone when Everyone was young, i.e. three quarters of a century ago. And because that was a good while back this scrapbook of Gibbs's polyvalent life is constellated with personae, places, incidents and kit (furniture, *objets de vertu*) intended to put his world in some sort of context which differentiates it from the mainstream Saturday parade of grockles and nostalgics for a Swinging London which had decades ago moved on: "The Chelsea Potter's where it's at." No longer (and never was).

On that count the smallness of this world is perhaps not as emphatically stressed as it might have been. It was bound to just a few seconds and places in Chelsea, no further west than World's End. Lucy Moore tends to treat the pernicious era as a monist entity. She was not born when Gibbs was at his clamorous and stealthy zenith.

Gibbs's world was not built with an eye on legacy. Though it got one – and how – in the form of the craze for really shockingly trashy clothes, grotesque cars, music, witless ugliness and lapels that filled a room with their wearer's humiliation. Sometimes it felt as though the world had been redesigned for maximum oafishness by Donald McGill and Benny Hill. That was the 1970s, the decade that forgot taste and probably had none in the first place.

It was what happened when Gibbs's essentially arts-and-crafts sensibility and foraging eye were traduced by the crassest sort of manufacture: an Aston Martin gave way to an Austin Allegro packing five blue rinses. That every piece about tailor John Pearse or the club Alibi or the restaurant Casserole is forced to rely upon the same few photographs and same few well-rehearsed witnesses rather gives the game away.

At the level of trade, where Gibbs operated, discretion was all and a man's word was said to count

This engaging book is not, then, another tired yarn of Mini Mokes, Getaway People, nylon and microskirts on rugby footballing thighs: such entertainments were by and for the proletariat who sang along with ex-brickies in velvet. And they predated the covert hush of Gibbs's microcosm. Note the title: *Christopher Gibbs: His World*. That's a warning of exclusivity as certain as a Great Dane's maw.

Here we learn about secret swathes of silk velvet, about Baghdadi cooking behind an occluded door on Fulham Road, about reading Borges aloud and cavorting on drystone walls dressed as minstrels and troubadours. Nor, thankfully, is it an inventory of a decorator's consigns. It is a skewed portrait of Gibbs. He was not quite an artist – though he flattered himself as a designer – more a collector and collagist, an eye, a domestic deity sprinkling Maghrebin magic from a cumin censer. In this microworld of dandiacals, designers drink from translucent cup and saucer while lower-caste decorators slurp from sugar-crusted mugs that mark them as salt of the earth – the kind who know their place. In Gibbs's world rank and hierarchy – quasi-martial but often flimsily dissembled – endured so long as Everyone (the initiated) was alive to recognize its codes till the very end.

At the level of trade, where Gibbs operated, discretion was all and a man's word was said to count. Incorrect attribution is a tort, and dodgy provenance is more than that for it is applied to buyers, sellers, families of blood or of no blood worth transfusing. Gibbs once showed me a startlingly strange tessellated portrait of a man (*c*. 1600) which, he claimed, he could not sell because he knew nothing of its back story save that it was probably Neapolitan. It reminded me of Meade Falkner's *The Lost Stradivarius*, a book which now, 50 years later, reminds me of Gibbs himself. That tessellated portrait itself has gone to the mattresses. It'll turn up.

Gibbs was also a writer on design for magazines read by aspiring people with little imagination but plenty of money: design in this context means rooms cluttered by those very magazines, bibelots, *Directoire ormolu*, minor masterpieces. He wrote without cognizance of his pomposity or fawning: "A house has to be awakened, furnished, lived in and made a home. There are those who have a natural aptitude for such activities but they are a rare breed, for special houses require a special understanding bred of knowledge and experience. Often, these days, the help of professionals is sought."

The special style Gibbs sold was his own special awakening. Inflated and proud, yet cautiously so. English understatement raised

LORD SNOWDON

Lord Snowdon's 1985 portrait of Christopher Gibbs in his Bond Street gallery, once describe as 'God's attic'

its timid head. It was, to say the least, hybrid. And it was learned young. At the family house of Tyntesfield – built near Bristol to the designs of the unorthodox goth Henry Woodyer and a couple of other less wayward high Victorians – styles and sources clash with abandon. It is not that far from a well-appointed junk shop. Gibbs wrote of it with his precious chum Bruce Chatwin murmuring pretty "poetic" prose in his ear, prose which really needs a thorough kicking from some louts on the way back to barracks.

In another life Gibbs might have been an exemplary dealer in Pimlico or Bond Street. But that would be anti-Gibbs, far from the Gibbs who connected with Everyone: the Queen Mother, numerous Sainsburys, Rothschilds, a Getty or two, Talitha Pol, Gavin Young, Gavin Lambert, Poppet John, Barbara Hutton, and surviving bright young(ish) things such as Juliet Duff whom David Herbert (a sort of sage to Gibbs) called "a four-masted schooner with mink sails".

The connection that most colored Gibbs was with Mick Jagger, whom he was jokily said to be teaching to be a "gentleman." Given Jagger's chameleonic deftness this was no more than a modest leap. Fifty years ago every rock band's boast that "we are the new aristocracy" was a pathetic delusion. Gibbs and Jagger – *au fond* devotees of the old order, of literal aristocracy and huge families – did not change all that. But they did create a new patron class. *His World* shows how they did it.

Christopher Gibbs: His World, *edited by Lucy Moore, is published by Clearview Books*.

Igby Rigney as Bret and Homer Gere as Robert Mallory in The Shards

Television
Paradise lost
James Delingpole

The Shards
Disney+

My father once drove down the King's Road with Marianne Faithfull and Terence Stamp in a paisley-painted Mini to buy a velvet suit from Granny Takes A Trip while high on acid. No, not really. I was always very disappointed with my parents' "what it was really like in the 1960s" anecdotes because basically they didn't have any.

Now my own children are having similar problems with my anecdotes about the legendary 1980s. Yes, it's true that I did go to see Duran Duran at the height of their fame, but only to keep my little sister company in a football stadium smelling of chips and fizzy pop and filled with screaming 12-year-old girls. Yes, I did wear eyeliner and white lipstick once, but I looked a prat. Yes, I did listen to lots of fashionable synth pop, like the Human League's *Dare*. But I also listened to Dire Straits, because that was how it was. Great decades are only worth living through second time round in a haze of nostalgia and with a more carefully curated soundtrack. That's one reason I can so heartily recommend *The Shards*: finally the 1980s as you almost wish you had experienced them – endless sex with beautiful people, hot tubs, fast cars, cocktails, sharp tailoring, languidly drawled one-liners, tennis, horses…

It's a bit like a younger, hipper version of *Rivals*, only without the self-deprecating humor and faint whiff of naffness. That's because we're not in Jilly Cooper's jolly, bonktastic, tongue-in-cheek Rutshire but in Bret Easton Ellis's oppressively chic, cruelly sardonic, exquisite but ghastly Los Angeles, recreated in his semi-autobiographical slasher novel *The Shards*. We're in the early 1980s: the music is great, all the kids are beyond cool, and they live in beautiful houses with maids, pools and absent parents. But there's a snake in the garden and it's about to wreak havoc on this pampered, insolent community of tragically spoiled brats. The author Bret is represented by a character called Bret (Igby Rigney) who provides the dry, knowing, wistful voice-over. Bret is writing a novel about his world – the last year at an elite prep school for kids of the rich and famous, some of them played by kids of the actual 1980s rich and famous. Supermodel Cindy Crawford's daughter Kaia Gerber plays pouting, supermodelish Susan Reynolds; the mysterious, handsome and sinister new arrival Robert Mallory is played by Homer Gere, whose father is, of course, Charlie Sheen. Joke. But you see how meta the whole project is.

Anyway, this snake in the garden I mentioned... it is, as per usual, Bret Easton Ellis's trademark MacGuffin: a savagely inventive serial killer. This one acquires the nickname the Trawler because first he sneaks into your house and nicks all the fish in your tropical tank (to be disemboweled and served up later with your body, along with your other pets which he also kills); then when he's ready to display your corpse, somewhere ostentatious like your tennis court, he wraps it all

FX

up in fishing nets. Normally I dislike this sort of thing. I couldn't even start Ellis's *American Psycho*, let alone finish it. There is far too much violence in cable TV drama, often involving women being tortured and ritually murdered by serial killers. (I blame young female audiences. They're the ones driving this masochistic trend.) But though the horror scenes are pretty graphic they're somehow rendered bearable by the context because, a bit like the permanently drugged-up characters, you feel as if you're experiencing everything at one remove.

That is, it's real and also not real; intense and at the same time, yeah, whatever. Showrunner and co-director Ryan Murphy has captured perfectly the bizarre, unsettling register of this tainted paradise, where anything you want is yours, the drawback being that you can't enjoy it because it's never enough, and anyway emotions are so uncool and best suppressed with another quaalude.

This is a world where one second girls can be speculating on the final moments of the latest classmate to have gone missing, presumed dead, and next, in almost the same breath, asking with the same degree of seriousness: "Does this lipgloss make me look fat?" It's a world of pure surface – lovingly captured in close-ups of jacuzzi jets blasting into ultra-blue water and shiny black vinyl discs about to play some classic 1980s banger and the fetishistically observed inner workings of a C90 cassette in a cassette player recording the screams of a terrified torture victim being forced to eat his tropical fish while LSD is injected into his neck.

Very *American Psycho* revisited in other words: high fashion meets pornographic ultraviolence. I wouldn't at all blame you if you don't think it's for you. But it's easily the best drama on television.

Exhibitions

Ai why why?

Digby Warde-Aldam

Ai Weiwei: Button Up!
Aviva Studios, Manchester, until September 6

Jasper Marsalis: Still Life
Chisenhale Gallery, London,
until September 6

When Ai Weiwei (*b.*1957) arrived in Europe in 2015, fresh from state-imposed house arrest, he was greeted as a hero. Museums and galleries fell over themselves to host exhibitions devoted to the West's new favorite dissident – even while he continued, mysteriously, to participate in Chinese art fairs. Nobody dared say it at the time, but his actual art – vast, chaotic installations and whimsical sculptures that drew on Chinese folklore – was even then just a bit dull.

Soon enough, the artist was positioning himself as the voice of the global dispossessed, in the process (to borrow someone else's phrase) morphing into a kind of Chinese Banksy. His work became self-aggrandizing in tone and ever more naff in form, in the process losing any trace of subtlety. A particular low came when the artist lay down on a Greek beach and posed as the drowned Syrian refugee Aylan Kurdi, an "awareness-raising" stunt as ill-judged as it was risible.

That picture doesn't figure in his current retrospective in Manchester, but if it did, it wouldn't be anywhere near the stupidest exhibit in the show. Everything here is crap; it's also massive, for somewhere down the line, it seems that the artist has mistaken monumentalism for profundity. The Zeppelin-hangar space is rammed with outsized exhibits, accompanied by patronizing captions that assume that no Mancunian has ever been to an art exhibition.

The major attraction here is a giant black dinghy hanging from the ceiling, its sides weighed down by 258 anonymous, scaled-up mannequins in lifejackets. This tells us that, firstly, Ai cares about the migration crisis; second, that whatever talent he once possessed has long since evaporated.

It's heroically awful: there's a billboard-sized chart depicting the history of bombs; an upturned, crochet recreation of Jacques-Louis David's "Napoleon Crossing the Alps," which – colonial-studies alert! – replaces the Emperor's horse with a zebra; massive banners displaying the flags of the erstwhile "Great Powers." Empires and police states are bad, Ai tells us, and we all bear the burden of guilt.

He's probably right, but this stuff is pure finger-wagging junk, less an art exhibition than a really tawdry theme park. I'm honestly not sure I can remember seeing a show quite so objectively, impressively wretched.

Not that there's much going on in London. The best exhibitions – Donald Locke at Camden Art Centre, or Ana Mendieta at Tate Modern – commemorate dead artists. A notable exception comes with Jasper Marsalis's show at the Chisenhale Gallery – a flawed display that nonetheless manages to be miles more interesting than any other contemporary art you're likely to see this summer.

Marsalis (*b.*1995) is the son of jazz musician Wynton and he is charismatic in the extreme. His eloquence doesn't always translate into what he makes, but there's nonetheless something wild to his practice. The *mise-en-scène* here involves a multiplex-scale screen broadcasting live imagery from

I'm honestly not sure I can remember seeing a show quite so objectively, impressively wretched

webcams positioned in beauty spots around the globe. Meanwhile, massive speakers blast atonal FM frequencies, creating a near-symphonic continuum of white noise.

We thus get weird, grainy and gorgeous 30-second livestreams of the Sussex Downs, unidentifiable night skies, a view of a beach in (I think) Socotra and whatever else, set to an undetermined jumble of radio signals, the music they carry wiped from the equation. No matter that all we're likely to see in motion are rippling waves on Alpine lakes and perhaps the occasional, speck-like passing car. The potluck roll of images introduces an element of jeopardy to the proceedings: you could, potentially, catch someone dumping a corpse in a bush.

Marsalis says he's trying to make us reconsider our appreciation of landscape, and alert us to the hidden means via which we receive live information. I'm not sure he succeeds, but I was seduced all the same – and before I knew it, I'd spent more than an hour in the show. Whatever the artist's intention: it draws you in, it feels new, and most important, it looks ravishing. In August, in London, I could settle for less.

Classical music

Apple of my eye

Damian Thompson

Just two weeks ago I was ready to cancel my subscription to Apple Music. I'd stumbled across its "Composer Essentials" – a list of 100 composers so significant that they merit their own curated playlists. It includes Bonds, Boyle, Caccini, Dawson, Dett, Perry, Poldowski, Sohy, Strohl and Walker.

If those names don't ring a bell, how about the composers who are missing? Albéniz, C.P.E. Bach, Bellini, Berg, Bizet, Borodin, Chabrier, Kodály, Martinu, Messiaen, Mussorgsky, Nielsen, Poulenc, Schoenberg, Walton, Weber and Webern.

See what I mean? The "Essentials" list is stuffed with DEI hires. Which – an analogy to Cambridge University comes to mind – does no favors to the black and female composers who deservedly feature in it, such as Joplin and Beach. In what twisted alternative musical history does Bizet bite the dust, the whole Second Viennese School drop off the map and Germaine Tailleferre nudge out Francis Poulenc?

As I say, I was thinking of canceling my direct debit. But then Apple Music announced that, to mark the 150th anniversary of the première of Wagner's *Ring Cycle*, it has created a Listening Guide that "accompanies listeners through all 15-plus hours of Wagner's drama via expert text-based commentary synchronized in real time to Sir Georg Solti's legendary Decca Classics recording." That's 45,000 words of "moment-by-moment insights into the music, mythology, characters and ideas."

Apparently there are already 200 synchronized guides. That was news to me. To be fair, it's not the sort of thing you just stumble across. Intuitive it ain't. Go to the Apple Classical homepage, choose "search," and up pops a page of icons. The Listening Guide section displays the albums that have received the treatment; when you start playing a track, click the tiny treble clef at the bottom and, at last, you're in.

As the music moves, so do the highlighted words. For example, in the first few seconds of a famous piano concerto: "Over a gentle murmuring accompaniment, the solo piano plays a simple, very singable theme in both hands…" Run the text without the music and there's a neat challenge for music buffs.

Anyway, you can understand why Wagner's *Ring* would be perfect for a synchronized commentary – and also why it took a whole year to assemble. There are dozens of leitmotifs in the cycle; by the time we reach *Götterdämmerung* they're in every bar, though they're so beautiful that we scarcely notice.

Alas, the score doesn't name them, so Wagnerian trainspotters are always squabbling over whether one group of notes represents a curse or the renunciation of love, or at what point the Ring motif turns into Valhalla, and so on.

There are several rival lists out there, some running to nearly 200 entries and all guaranteed to bore the average listener to tears.

On the other hand you can't totally ignore the leitmotifs because they drive the story forward, often revealing things that you won't find in the libretto. But blink and you've missed it – and, let's face it, it's easy to blink during what Rossini called Wagner's *mauvais quarts d'heure*.

Listening Guide to the rescue! The commentary kept me alert during the Norns' moanathon in the Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*, after which comes my favorite moment in the whole cycle, beginning with Brünnhilde's post-coital cry of "O! heilige Götter!"

Here's Apple's description: "The descending Siegfried's Missions motif and Brünnhilde's new Love motif are rapturously combined… The salutes become a duet at last: they greet each other, culminating in a top C for Brünnhilde." That's precisely the right level of detail, and my iPad served it up without prompting, allowing me to forget the fatuous libretto. Needless to say Birgit Nilsson hits that C like a laser and Solti whips up the Vienna Phil into a frenzy as it spurts out "an orgiastic treatment of Siegfried's harmonized Horn Call." Ooh, missus!

To cut a long story short, Apple's Classical app is my new favorite toy

To cut a long story short, Apple's Classical app is my new favorite toy. I can't wait to use the simultaneous commentary on the Goldberg Variations: I'm embarrassed to admit that, after decades of listening, I routinely mix up canonic and noncanonic variations. Likewise, I still need extra tuition to show me where Mahler begins his development sections.

But, see above, Apple still subscribes to bien-pensant fantasies. Will it waste its new superpower? I wonder if some hard-up music critic has been dragooned into writing a simultaneous commentary for, say, a symphony by Louise Farrenc (1804-75).

Imagine if, instead of the prescribed gushing, the text told the truth: "Here the composer switches on the autopilot as she glides towards the home key and a derivative coda…"

On second thought, let's not go there. I've just remembered which company manufactured, and can presumably peer inside, the computer on which I'm typing these words. So… guide my listening, Apple!

THE LISTENER

John McCabe

signum CLASSICS
JOHN McCABE
Symphonies 2 & 3 and Cello Concerto
Raphael Wallfisch, cello
BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra | Kenneth Woods, conductor

Grade: B+

"Cheltenham Symphonies," they used to call them – a catch-all term for the kind of large-scale, traditionally inclined postwar works that found a natural home at the Cheltenham Music Festival. But it was also a sneer: a dig at the supposedly parochial nature of British music in the 1960s and 1970s. Over in Europe, the avant-garde was doing whizzy things with Marxism and electronics. British music, went the narrative, was suburban, outdated and drab.

Now listen to John McCabe's Third Symphony of 1978. McCabe's orchestration is as gorgeous as a bird of paradise; it shimmers like the colors on the surface of a bubble. Not that there's anything fragile about McCabe's musical engineering. McCabe, a Liverpudlian who died in 2015, was a formidably intelligent pianist (his Haydn recordings are still unrivaled) and in fact the Third Symphony takes its inspiration from Haydn, plus another of McCabe's symphonic heroes, Carl Nielsen.

You'd never guess it. McCabe's imagination – here, and in the bigger, more austere Second Symphony of 1971 – has a force that stands unaided, and which carries over into his late cello concerto *Songlines*, which is eloquently played by Raphael Wallfisch. Don't be fooled by the hippy-dippy title; it's closer to Shostakovich than world music.

All three works are driven with fiery conviction by American conductor Kenneth Woods, who has spent much of the last decade reviving and recording Britain's neglected symphonic heritage. Some day we'll thank him. Meanwhile, the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra struts like a peacock – and why wouldn't they, when Woods and McCabe make them sound this good?

— Richard Bratby

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No life

Lloyd Evans

"Do you like animals?" asked the woman at the door, collecting for a zoo. "No, I hate them, they keep trying to kill me," I said. That got rid of her. I feel a little ashamed of my hostility to animals, which I inherited from my mother. She was raised in rural Ireland and she loathed the countryside and all its nonspeaking inhabitants. To her, animals were either predators or ingredients, and she particularly despised geese, rats, mice, squirrels and dogs. "Vermin," was one of her favorite nouns. And she regarded the word "pet" as a self-deluding fantasy. Which seems reasonable. Animals cannot be tamed but their owners can be deceived. Any beast will turn murderous when cornered.

I have a survival tip if you need one. I was attacked by a dog at the age of 18 while passing through an Arab village in northern Israel. A snarling mongrel scampered out of a copse and barked violently at me. I walked on, suppressing my fear and hoping to project an air of invincible calm. It worked. The dog hung back and I kept walking, relieved that the danger had passed, but it raced up from behind and grabbed my ankle in its pincer jaws. Instinct took over. I froze. Its teeth tore at my flesh but I didn't move or make a noise. This confused it. Perhaps it thought I'd turned into a tree or a fence post. It realized that I wasn't a meal so it relaxed its grip and lurked nearby, waiting.

Dog-hate entered my soul. It festers there still. But people dislike people who dislike dogs so I keep it hidden

I remained stock still, bollard-like, for several minutes until it slunk away. On my flesh it left the imprint of its teeth, first in blood, later in scabs. Nothing has ever nauseated me quite as much as that half-circle of fang-marks scored on to my skin by a cowardly scavenging fiend. Dog-hate entered my soul. It festers there still. But people dislike people who dislike dogs so I keep it hidden.

I once knew a woman who loved dogs of all breeds except two. Afghan hounds – "they look so silly in their flares" – and Dalmatians. "They're really thick," she would tell me, lowering her voice in case they overheard her. Touched by her enthusiasm, I started to appreciate the quirks of certain breeds. The lurcher, even when dry, appears to have stepped out of a car wash. The greyhound looks like a rat that's been told it's a supermodel. The tubular body of the dachshund resembles a stretch limousine.

Dog lovers use the same argument as gun owners and claim that dogs are innocent and the fault lies with their human custodians. This is true, partially. Sometimes a new owner forgets to feed his dog which then eats a baby or two and brings the entire species into disrepute. That may explain the fad for "rescues." If a rescue dog behaves sweetly, the new owners take the credit. If it runs amok and kills, the old owners get the blame.

I want to believe that dogs are not all that bad. But they keep persuading me that they deserve to be shot. Last summer, I was crossing a park in west London where a trainer was teaching a bald, fist-shaped mutt to retrieve tennis balls. It rocketed across the grass like a plastic bullet and, after snatching up the ball, it pelted back to its trainer at full tilt. I could see that my route would intersect with the mutt's speeding trajectory so I slowed to a halt but it ram-rodded straight into my ankle, bounced off and sprinted away. Its skull, moving at 18 miles an hour, had collided with my ankle. The trainer failed to acknowledge the brute's attempt to amputate my foot. I limped for weeks afterward.

Perhaps I have an aura that spooks dogs. They howl and bark at me randomly. Or they leap out of doorways and snarl in my face. I've noticed that sunglasses unnerve them so I remove my shades if I see a pit bull staring at me. A few years ago, I was cycling through the Olympic Village when a cross-eyed spaniel frolicked against my front wheel. I lost balance and crash-landed on the tarmac. The owner, watching from a bench, rushed over to see if his half-blind playmate was injured. He cradled the beast in his arms and retreated to his seat where he tousled its head and whispered consoling words in its floppy ears. I was still sprawling on the path, badly winded and taking a mental inventory of the damage. Palms scuffed, ribs hurt, one knee cut and bruised. Nothing serious. The owner gazed vaguely in my direction. "Dog all right?" I asked him. "A bit too much excitement," he said. "She needs to go home."

I want to believe that dogs are not all that bad. But dogs keep persuading me that they deserve to be shot

On TikTok, I watch a lot of dog-attack videos and I'm amazed to see that very few owners know how to pacify a hysterical animal. Shouting, gesticulating, pulling its collar or hitting it with a broom handle will intensify its anger. By all means, strike the dog but make sure you kill it. A less than fatal blow will prolong the attack. This vital lesson should be taught in primary schools. Let's be honest, we live in a dog-eat-man world. I've picked my team. One day, you may have to as well.

Dog's life

Sophia Money-Coutts

Three women in my Tuesday weights class are getting married. While we squat and thrust and fling our kettlebells around, there's nonstop talk of veils, decorations, modes of transport to the venue and whether anyone eats wedding cake these days. Men are allowed in this weights class but, oddly, none ever shows up.

The major update from one of the brides this week was that the local register office had given permission for her dog to attend the ceremony. She duly bought "a little tux" for Badger, so he could look the part.

How do we feel about dogs at weddings? Given the declining birth rate, soaring dog population and lamentations that young people are increasingly relinquishing the idea of children in favor of the cockerpoo,

it's increasingly common to see a dog trot up the aisle. He may even have a little pouch attached to his collar, not for poo bags or biscuits, but for the rings. Why rely on the hopeless, hungover best man to remember the rings when you could simply make your dog the ring bearer instead?

I'd be nervous about including my Dennis. The list of contraband that he's swallowed includes but is not limited to: tissues off the pavement, discarded chicken bones, plastic bottle tops, a toy Pac-Man, 597 foam earplugs, conkers, shards of plastic Biro, socks and the occasional knicker gusset. I wouldn't put a three-carat solitaire past him.

And if you allow dogs, do you allow other pets? Horses, of course, aren't uncommon at some country weddings, and I once went to a Hampshire wedding where alpacas greeted us as we entered the marquee. But what if the groom wanted to bring his python or tarantula? If he's that way inclined, he's done jolly well to find someone willing to marry him, but some of the congregation may be perturbed.

The dog policy varies from council to council. Islington town hall, for instance, is very pro dogs at weddings, although only one dog per couple is allowed and there's a list of rules. You must stop your dog from climbing on the town hall furniture, the website stipulates, and bring wipes to "clean up any messes." Got that, bridal party? Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue, and a packet of Dettol wipes while you're at it. Bromley council has a blanket no-dogs policy at all its venues. Chelsea town hall will allow them, but only if it's a labrador (only joking, spaniels are welcome too). The Church of England, meanwhile, has no official dog policy. If you're doing it in a church, you need to chat up the relevant vicar.

Including one's dog has become so popular that various businesses exist to meet demand. Precious Pets Weddings boasts that it's the "UK's original wedding dog chaperone service," covering more than 50 venues. Say I was getting married, for instance (don't laugh, just try to imagine it). If I could overcome my fear that Dennis would treat the rings like a delicious snack, Precious Pets would help me on the day.

According to its website, it would collect him on the morning of my wedding for a pre-ceremony walk "to burn off any pre-wedding excitement" and ensure he was calm, not down the pub knocking back pints with the ushers. They would spruce him up to make sure he was "photo ready," then take him to the venue or church so Dennis could "familiarize" himself with the location. If I fancied it, he could arrive at said venue in its "Wedding Wheels" car, decorated with paw-print bows and ribbons. There's a built-in camera system in this car, should I want any footage of Dennis making this grand arrival.

Precious Pets would look after him during

'With all these wildfires, a cruise has never been so alluring.'

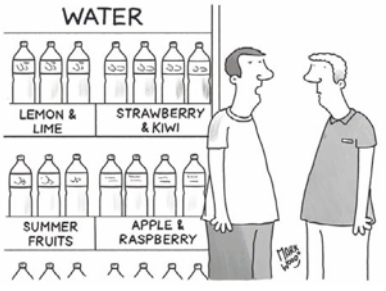
the service, take photos of his big moment, then whisk him back to an agreed location. No reception for Dennis. He'd only hog all the canapés and do something unmentionable on the dance floor. The cost for this service starts at £425.

It's big business because, according to a Guide Dogs UK survey, more than 90 percent of dog owners planning a wedding now want their dog to be involved. Ring bearer isn't necessarily the only role, either. Dogs

I once went to a Hampshire wedding where alpacas greeted us as we entered the marquee

may also apparently "walk" the bride down the aisle, act as "flower pup" alongside the bridesmaids or page boys and be included in the family photos. Astonishingly, 42 percent of those surveyed said they'd also like to involve their dog in the first dance. How? Does PETA know about this? The idea of including your poor dog in some embarrassing spectacle while a ropey local band cranks out a "Can't Help Falling in Love" cover feels suspiciously like cruelty to me.

Disaster stories seem to be relatively common. Dogs that savage the bouquet; dogs that leap into the lake moments before the critical moment and then shake themselves all over the bride's pristine dress; dogs that beat everyone else to the wedding cake and then need an emergency stomach pump at the vet because they've swallowed too many raisins. That said, the Precious Pets website says it's taking bookings for 2028, so even though Mr. Right remains determinedly elusive, perhaps I should pick a date, just in case?



'Do you sell "water" water?'

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PLACE

Odyssey of pleasure

The joy of getting lost in the Peloponnese

Alice Hancock

Even if you're far from being a classicist and loved Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey*, it hardly paints an enticing picture of Greece as a holiday destination. But perhaps we can all admit that, lovely though they are, the Greek islands are becoming a little predictable.

A Greece that is lesser known, and far more exciting (dare I say, Homeric) is the Peloponnese. This is a dark and swarthy Greece – a better setting for parched shipwrecks and violent feudalism, as well as hidden hotels and good food. Haunted by Lord Byron and once home to the great travel writer Patrick Leigh Fermor, the Peloponnese is a region to get lost in.

And when the temperatures begin to roll away from the highs of August and Europe's school-holiday tourists have gone home, you can go hours without seeing a soul. Driving down to the southernmost tip of continental Europe at Cape Tainaron, I spotted only two bored boys herding goats and one other lost tourist car as I spun the hired Škoda along some hair-raising roads.

"This was not occupied by the Ottomans. This is where real Greeks come from – where the revolution started," explained Panagiota Athanassa, a local of the Mani peninsula. On a map, Mani is the second finger of the Peloponnesian coast and perhaps the most remote. Tourism is the biggest employer here and the population is clearly getting old. Athanassa was one of several locals who said that it is only in the last three to four years that tourists have begun to make the journey to the jagged Peloponnesian coast and Arcadia, the mountainous region to its north. Another local said American tourists have only recently discovered the peninsula: they have been arriving only since 2024 and are mostly Greek-Americans visiting the land of their ancestors.

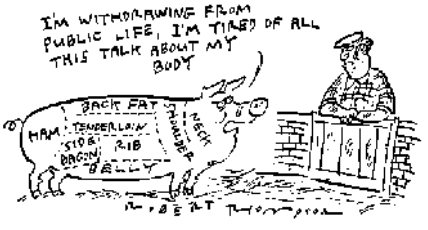
Getting to the Peloponnese is relatively easy: a flight to Athens followed by a toll road (upgraded recently to a full motorway) which can speed you to the heart of the Peloponnese in a couple of hours if you travel at Greek speed. In the 1970s, some parts of Mani were only accessible by boat and foot. You can also – as I decided to – take back roads from Athens to Cave of the Seal, a magisterial arch carved in the cliff that faces into the Gulf of Corinth. It is worth a stop if you can manage the acutely steep path.

I also paused at the Corinth Canal – a narrow tranche of water cut into the rock in 1893 to connect the Ionian and Aegean seas – and then stopped overnight in Nafplio. It is easily the most pleasant of the larger Peloponnesian towns thanks to its colorful Venetian architecture and short stint as the capital of the first independent state of Greece.

Beyond Nafplio, the Peloponnese opens out into vast remoteness. Wind turbines gaze over ruins from all the eras of Peloponnese rule: Spartan, Byzantine, Roman. I visited ancient Mycenae, home of Agamemnon, whose citadel was once wedged on to a plateau among imposing mountains. And Mystras, an important Byzantine city, now a romantic ruin strung over a spur of the Taygetus mountains. It is almost on a par with Pompeii in its completeness, but with far fewer tourists. Mostly you will find yourself alone among the crumbling golden stones with just a few stray cats for company.

Mostly you will find yourself alone among the crumbling golden stones

I stayed at two places in Mani. Both were built in the typical architectural style of "deep" Mani: squat towers with three or so floors and small windows for defense. At the Aria Estate, built in recent years but in this old Mani style, each room has a terrace overlooking the Ionian sea. The rooms are surrounded by a garden filled with rosemary, lavender and thyme, as well as a vineyard beyond. The pool is cut into the hill with a view of the headland of Messina.



Citta dei Nicliani is a smaller, more familial place. Tanya and Ilias Sepsas, Athenians by origin who lived briefly in the Balkans before settling in Mani more than a decade ago, have passed most of the running of the hotel to their son. They continue to oversee the food though, much of which appears from their garden or the local surrounds – a bounty of oranges, pink pepper, dill and olives, some lemon-scented Ionian fish.

You could spend a week in Mani. Take in Limeni, an enticing village strung around a cove that in summer attracts more of the Instagram crowd. Or commit to a day hiking out to Cape Tainaron. After a hot walk to the continent's southern point, the reward is a swim in the quiet cove, followed by cured anchovies from the Akron Tenaro taverna above it. Worth knowing about, too, is the village of Vatheia, deserted for reasons that are unclear, and Gerolimenas, perfect for an evening cocktail and a swim. I also spent a happy morning stocking up in the main town of Areopoli, a place with plenty of churches and an overabundance of cafés.

Determined to hike in the Arcadian mountains – and breathe some mountain air before returning home – I cut Mani short and drove up to Manna (via more grandiose ruins at Messini). Once a sanatorium for tuberculosis sufferers, the hotel was founded by Anna Mela- Papadopoulou, a pioneering nurse who died of the disease herself in 1938. It is now an upmarket hotel with a Scandinavian vibe.

Stratis Bayatas, its owner, used to play in the ruined building as a kid and oversaw the conversion. The lighting was designed by the same man who illuminated the Acropolis. But it is far from pretentious. Even Odysseus might have been happy to pause his travels at Manna, to dine on local honey and scented lamb's shoulder after an all-day hike. Surrounded by pine forests, I felt – unlike our hero – that I would really rather not go home.

The Wiki Man

Finding my voice

Rory Sutherland

The older and more plutocratic among you may remember the unlamented business-class airline seat of the 1980s and 1990s. Every few years, major airlines would proudly announce the wondrous extra legroom available in their long-haul business class and the increase in the recline angle of the seat. And each time the experience got worse.

Now the person sitting in front of you invaded ever more of your airspace when they reclined their own seat. You then had no choice but to follow suit. The resulting Nash Equilibrium meant everyone on board was forced to spend the entire journey leaning backward at 45 degrees. Getting to the lavatory required playing an involuntary game of Twister with the person sitting by the aisle.

The flat bed was an epiphany. Not only was it a proper bed, but it restored territorial integrity to the passenger. And you could finally get to the loo without ending up on the Sex Offenders Register. Looking back, this was the perfect example of what happens when everybody pursues the wrong benchmark, and where a behavior that is individually rational becomes collectively catastrophic.

It's far easier to be polite speaking at 150 words a minute than when typing at 40

All the while, from 1983 onwards, a similarly infectious stupidity was infiltrating business life at ground level. This was the cancerous spread of the keyboard. Youngsters see the keyboard as traditional office furniture. It isn't. Yes, QWERTY is 150 years old, but the practice of everyone typing their own words in a professional setting dates to about 1983, when spreadsheets began putting computers on managers' desks, along with a keyboard and a screen. Before that, typing was strictly secretarial.

The spreadsheet required people to see immediately on screen the effects of every input. This low latency, the ability to see changes immediately, and to edit on the go, led people to spurn the typing pool. Professional typists achieving 90 words per minute were replaced by highly paid executives typing at 20 – the division of labor in reverse.

And because we didn't have a frame of reference, we never noticed how bad keyboards were, and how they got worse. Those clicky IBM keyboards were delightful compared with the touch screen one on a modern mobile phone. But the same Nash Equilibrium applies – that reclining seat problem again: when combined with email, the curt, ill-considered, asynchronous approach to communication was imposed on everyone. Decisions once made around a table in minutes are now eked out over weeks by two-finger typists. The loss in productivity is disastrous but invisible.

Salvation may be at hand. Basic voice dictation never delivered, but put a language model behind the microphone and you have something that's better than a dictation machine: like St. Paul, Cicero, John Milton and Barbara Cartland, you now have an amanuensis. One that knows how to spell Slavoj Žižek's name better than I do, that knows that Llanelli is a market town in Wales and that gets rid of all the "ers" and "ums," the vocal fillers and interjections – I dictated all of this as a test. I use something called Wispr Flow, and it has changed my life. In the interests of transparency, I am now a tiny investor in the business – but I became one because, like that chap in the Remington adverts, I liked the product.

The implications of the displacement of the keyboard will be immense, and I shall write – or rather pronounce – about this more in the future. But one of my first discoveries is that it's far easier to be polite speaking at 150 words a minute than when typing at 40. Some part of the nastiness of the internet comes from the fact that rudeness and brevity go together. As the old joke goes: why are there more Rangers supporters than Celtic supporters in Glasgow? Because it's a lot easier to chant "Fuck the Pope!" than "Fuck the Chief Moderator of the Free Presbyterian Church!"

DEAR MARY YOUR PROBLEMS SOLVED

Q. I have a good relationship with a neighbor. She has a labrador and I have a Jack Russell. If I cannot walk my dog she will do it and vice versa. Yesterday my daughter visited unexpectedly and was at the top of the house when she heard my neighbor open the front door and call my dog for his walk. Five minutes later she heard the dog being returned to the house. I don't want to fall out with my neighbor but I would always walk her labrador for at least 45 minutes and my dog needs a proper walk every day. How should I proceed?
N.B., Stockbridge

A. Fitness trackers for dogs are all the rage – attached to the collar, they count steps and provide GPS tracking. Buy one (roughly $80) and show it to your neighbor, along with the wall diary on which you are now going to be recording his step count. Suggest she buy one for her own dog. This measure should preempt any future temptation to "short change" your Jack Russell.

Q. I was recently told off by a lady of some status for saying that I had been invited grouse shooting. She led me to understand that the expression is "to shoot grouse." Is this, in fact, correct? If so, I have been in error for more than 40 years. Does the same rule apply to pheasant, partridge, duck, snipe, etc. Perhaps it exempts vermin? Please might you advise.
– N.C., Stanton Saint Bernard, Wiltshire

A. I addressed your question to two sportsmen of status. One, aged 70, says he talks of being invited to shoot grouse, pheasant, duck, etc. His son, aged 30, says he talks of being invited grouse, pheasant, or duck shooting. The two agree however that both expressions are these days acceptable. This kind of pedantry, while enjoyable, is now irrelevant where shooting is concerned since the bulk of those who can afford to take a shoot were never familiar with what was, or was not, a solecism.

Q. I'm thrilled to be invited to a Scottish house party next week but I hear my hosts have a tradition where after breakfast guests are given baps and a choice of fillings and invited to make their own picnic lunches. I don't want to draw attention to myself by just taking the meats and salads but I am desperately trying to avoid wheat. What should I do?
Name and address withheld

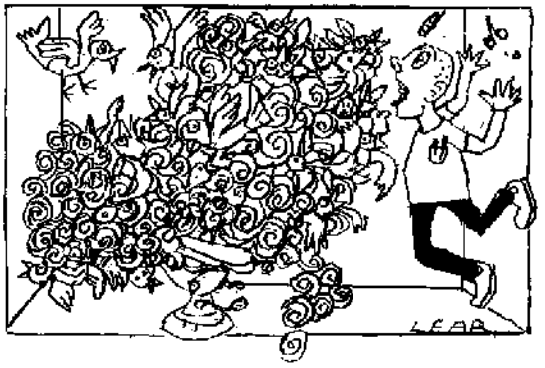
A. Load a bap like everyone else but secretly bring a supply of Nairn's gluten-free original oatcakes and a disposable spoon. Discreetly leave the bap behind for local seagulls and use the oatcakes to add bulk to your fillings. No one will notice.

Write to Dear Mary at dearmary@spectator.co.uk

NOTES ON...

Shaving

Nigel Jones



I was looking at a photo of my great-grandfather the other day and admiring his beard. A magnificent spade-shaped affair, it reached halfway down his chest. He was a Victorian, of course, and his era was, above all, the century of the beard. All the eminent Victorian males, such as Darwin, Dickens, the Earl of Salisbury and Prince Albert wore them.

When Donald Trump and Pete Hegseth decreed recently that all US military men should be clean shaven, it struck me that, had that rule been around in the 1860s, the American Civil War would never have been fought, since all the leading generals on both sides were endowed with substantial forests of facial hair. One Union commander, Ambrose Burnside, was so notably hirsute in this respect that he lent his name to sideburns. However, the British Army, unlike the Royal Navy, has usually taken a dim view of beards. In World War Two, only the eccentric general Orde Wingate was given exceptional permission to grow one.

Why did the beardies do it? After all, beards are itchy to the wearer and scratchy to anyone who encounters them intimately. Scraps of food get stuck in them and some men like me are left feeling inadequate because they can't ever manage to grow more than a scrubby approximation of one. Much better, surely, to take it all off with a clean and invigorating daily shave?

The ancient world was as divided on the question of beards: while the Greeks and Romans were proudly clean shaven, the Assyrians and Egyptians made something of a fetish of their beards, shaping and curling them into painfully elaborate statements of status.

The early modern western world bounced between centuries in attitudes to beards: in the early 15th century King Henry IV sported a forked beard, possibly to compensate for his scabied scalp, which was largely bald. Baldness also afflicted the Bard a couple of hundred years later, but he grew a neat little pointed number on his chin just to show he could. By the 17th century facial hair was worn to signify the religious and political differences that were tearing the kingdom apart: the Civil Wars were as much a conflict between clean-chinned Puritans and pointy-bearded Cavaliers as they were about the divine rights of kings and parliamentary governance. Razors held sway throughout the 18th century and only with the Victorian age did beards carry all before them once again.

Shaving was carried out using "cut-throat" razors until the delightfully named King Camp Gillette, an American businessman, popularized the safety razor at the end of the 19th century and cleaned out his competitors.

Shaving technology took another great leap forward in the 20th century with the invention of the electric razor. Shaving was once carried out by barbers, but is now generally a matter of private personal grooming. This is possibly because barbers became unfairly associated with the fictional activities of Sweeney Todd, the demon barber of Fleet Street, or the execution of mobster Albert Anastasia, gunned down during a shave in a New York barber's shop in 1957.

These days, the mysterious epidemic of premature baldness or shaven heads among modern men is often compensated for by hipsters growing luxuriant beards instead. There's nowt so shear as folk.

MIND YOUR LANGUAGE

Yoga

"Well, we all have areas of ignorance," said my husband with a little too much relish, I thought. He was responding to my admission that I had reached a ripe old age without realizing that the words *yoga* and *yoke* had the same origin.

Yoke has been used in English for more than 1,000 years and *yoga* only since about 1785, but it had been in use in Sanskrit since the first millennium BC. The meaning of *yoga* was held to be either the yoking and reining in of the senses, or the yoking and joining oneself to the Prana (life force), the Om (absolute) and the Universe.

In perhaps a parallel area of meaning, *religio* ("religion") was related by early Christian writers to *religare*, "that which ties believers to God," though Cicero connected it to *religere* "to read over again" – to observe rites carefully.

The Indo-European word that eventually gave us *yoke* had been supplying similar words to many related languages. In Greek, "yoke" was *zugon*; in Latin it was *iugum*. Even the Finns seem to have borrowed the word in the form *jukka* to mean "crossbar of a sled."

Meanwhile *yoga* slept happily in the Sanskrit vocabulary of Indian religions, until western fashion took up yoga classes. Yoga mats were first noticed by name in 1962, a momentous year that also gave us the *Yogi Bear Show*.

Does the celebrated bear derive his name, for an obvious reason, from *yogi*, an adept in yoga? The *Oxford English Dictionary* is cautious. "It is often said that the character was so named with allusion to the name of Lawrence Peter 'Yogi' Berra (1925-2015), US baseball player known for his witticisms, but this is difficult to substantiate and has been denied by the creators."

Berra got his nickname from a friend who thought his stance waiting cross-legged resembled a yogi in a film. It is hard to think that the bear of Jellystone Park did not share in Berra's yogic sobriquet.

— Dot Wordsworth

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